JAN. 1951

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

20¢

ANC.

TEST OF GUILT
by T. W. Ford

SATAN'S HOME SPREAD
FEATURE NOVEL
by Galen C. Colin

ONLY DEAD MEN LEAVE
by Floyd C. Day

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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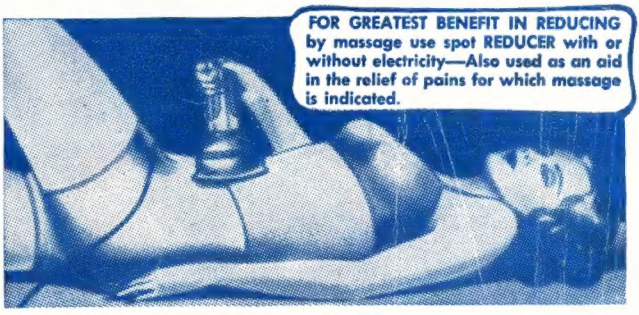

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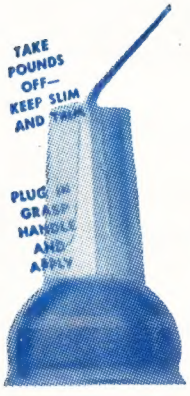

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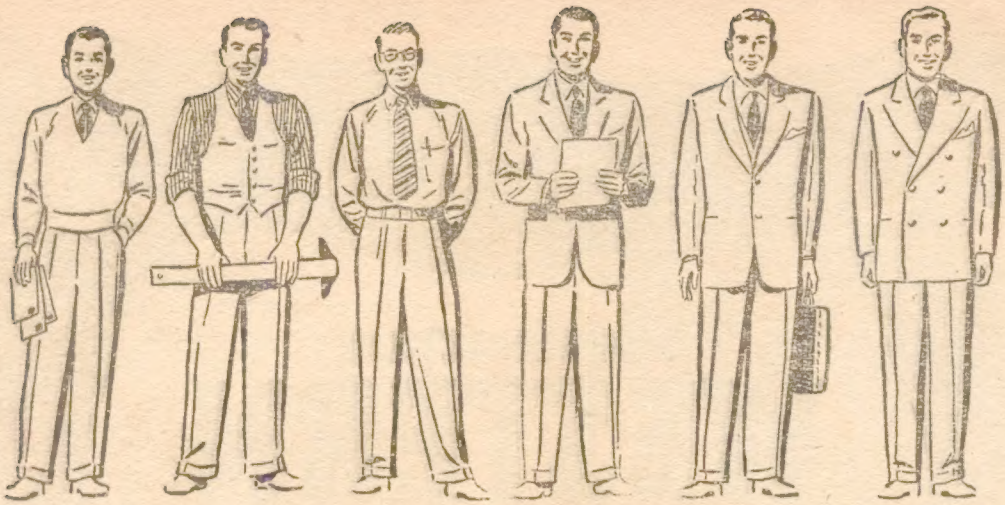

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Volume 18 January, 1951 Number 3

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Brad Towler agrees to masquerade as the notorious lobo and gun-wolf, Buck Briggs—then finds himself set up for a fast lynching!

Top-Hand Short Stories

ONLY DEAD MEN LEAVE ..... **W. F. Day** 69

No one quit the Ornsby outfit alive!

TEST OF GUILT ..... **T. W. Ford** 75

There was one way to find out if Ollie was telling the truth.

HELL'S POSTMASTER ..... **Cliff Campbell** 85

Old Hank aimed to stop Jim Mayo, whether Hank lived or died.

Fact Article

FREIGHTERS OF THE WESTERN PLAINS **Harold Gluck** 82

Before the iron horse connected the continent, the giant wagons carried the loads from all parts of the world.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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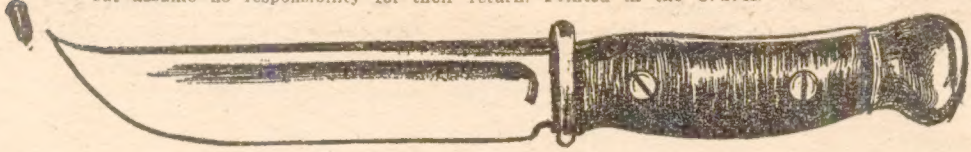

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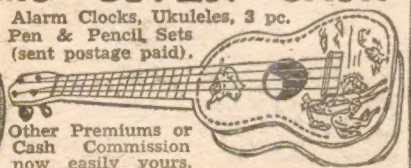

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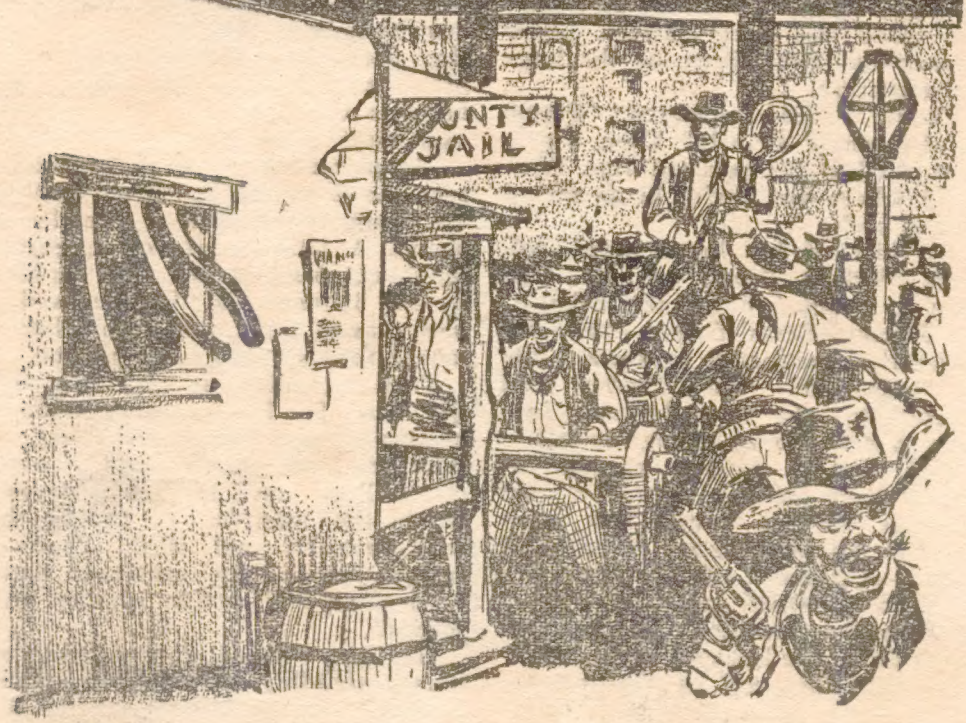
FEATURE NOVEL

SATAN'S

There was no time for talk. Brad and the girl cut loose as the mob boiled into the jail.

HOME SPREAD

By Galen C. Colin



Riding into Loder on a vengeance trail, Brad Towler agreed to masquerade as the notorious gunslick, Buck Briggs, in order to get a chance at his quarry, Sonora Jackson. But Towler didn't know that Briggs had backshot old Woodburn, and that the dead man's brother would be leading a lynch mob after Briggs.

SHIMMERING waves of blistering heat marched over the low, jagged ridges in endless files. They danced along the slopes, and lay in glistening pools of false water on the dust-dry flats. The bleak little town of Loder huddled dejectedly in the very center of the basin. The towering peaks of the Sangre de Cristos rimmed it twenty miles to the west. Sawtooth ridges hemmed it in on the south. Low hills, treeless and barren, bordered it on the east and north. The brassy lid of heat rested on the basin rim as tightly as the cover on a boiling pot.

Brad Towler pulled his leg-weary, sweat-caked roan to a halt in the sparse shade of the rickety livery stable at the north end of Loder. He pushed back his battered gray Stetson, and wiped the moisture from his brow with a damp red bandanna.

His blue eyes with the sun wrinkles at the corners, red-rimmed from the sun and dust, swept the single

rutted street. It was just like a dozen other tinder-dry, weather-warped little cow towns that he had circled—or passed through in the dead of night—as he skirted the desert for two hundred miles. Nothing to set it apart, nothing to identify it except the faded and rusty letters, *Loder Livery and Feed Barn,* on the huge old structure.

"Loder," Brad muttered. "Plumb in the center of hell." Then a grin that cracked his parched lips. "But hell's where the Devil's home spread should be."

He hitched his low-thonged holsters further front on his lean thighs, dragged down the brim of his Stetson, flexed fingers that were rein-stiff. Instinctive gestures, bits of precaution that Towler had learned to take when he rode into new towns or onto strange ranges.

Not that he made a practice of riding down the main drag of a town that he did not know. Too many sheriffs would be quick to spot his brand—that shock of hair the color of winter-browned grass, those deep-set eyes the cold blue of a mountain lake, those hands as swift as mountain lightning—and as deadly.

But Loder was different!

For a good ten minutes Brad Towler kept to the cover of the livery stable. As he studied the little town, he began to sense its intangible character. Even in the brilliant sunlight, Loder seemed furtive, shadowed by a hidden evil.

At last he touched his roan lightly with roweled heels. As the bone-weary animal shuffled into the dust of the single street, the impression of wickedness came even stronger. Two or three figures moved along the shadowed side of the street a block or two down. But they seemed to be light-shunning creatures, scuttling from one shadow to another.

The single-story, false-fronted buildings were drab and dreary. The scattered shacks first, then the more closely-set structures seemed to harbor narrowed eyes and leering faces that peered out from shutters closed against head and dust. Brad could feel the impact of those stares almost like a physical blow.

"Getting skittish," he muttered. "Nobody in Loder looking for me. Too far south for word to've traveled. Even he don't know—"

A HALF block ahead, the street, once a twisting buffalo trail, bent sharply to the left. The outjutting porch of a frame building cut off Towler's view. He edged his horse to the right side of the street, eyes alert to see beyond the turn.

The part of the street that he could see was deserted. But from beyond the bend there came a rumble of sound. A mixture of voices, coarse laughter, curses muted and jumbled by the distance and the shimmering heat waves. Brad slowed his horse, moved forward with alert caution.

Then he pulled his roan to a sudden stop, for his gaze held upon a cluster of men fifty yards ahead. A dozen or more, they formed a rough circle. Brad could not see what was inside the ring, but he caught the loud laughter and ribald curses—caught, too the excitement of those hard-bitten men, as they stamped and jostled.

His eyes flicked to the string of horses standing three-legged at the hitchrail. As he moved beyond the turn, he studied the brands for an instant. The irons were strange to him. He read the crudely-painted sign swinging in front of one of the squat buildings: *The One-Eyed Jack.*

His gaze swept across the street—held upon the buckboard and the pair of buckskin cayuses tethered there. Then he looked back to the ring of men. Abruptly he came to a decision. He might be ramming his head into plenty of trouble. He had ridden, with danger at his elbow for two hundred miles, just to line one man across his sights. And that man was not in the circle. But a single sound that reached his ears decided him.

He touched his roan with his rowels, urged it to a swifter gait. His right hand moved a little closer to the butt of his gun. As he headed for the ring of men, he caught glimpses of moving forms inside the circle.

He pulled up at a dozen yards. The

men had not noticed him yet. He swept them with narrowed gaze, and his jaws set. A smoldering light crept into his eyes. "Tougher'n an old boot-first cousin to the Devil himself!" Towler breathed.

Again that sound that had prodded him a moment before. He urged his horse a few steps nearer—leaned over to peer across the men's heads into the ring. At first he caught only a whirling, snarling, snapping mass of fur, teeth and claws—then a sharp pain-filled yelp.

A small gray-brindle animal hurtled back from the center. It landed sprawling in front of a grinning, stubbled-bearded man. A booted foot shot out, and the little animal catapaulted into the middle of the ring again.

Towler's frown deepened into a scowl of wrath. His right hand inched toward his holster. But he waited still another second. A loud, brutal laugh welled up. A huge, ungainly man with a twisted nose, scarred face and red-rimmed eyes rose from where he hunkered in the dust.

He jerked a chain leash, and a snarling, spitting ball of fur tugged at the other end. But Brad's eyes were upon the weaving little brindle dog. He had forgotten for a moment his errand here in Loder. Red wrath surged through his veins. For the dog was hardly more than a puppy—still with the lumbering awkwardness of puppyhood. But it faced the leashed bobcat with grim courage.

Then, apparently ashamed of its yelp of fear, the pup lunged at the bobcat. The big man who held the leash laughed loudly again, and loosed the chain a little. The ring of men surged forward eagerly.

Chuckles, throaty curses, coarse epithets reached Brad Towler's ears. His wrath burst its last strands of caution. His jaws tightened and his eyes blazed. He swept up his reins and jammed the rowels home. The rangy roan leaped forward. "Scatter, damn you! Scatter or get tromped!"

THE HORSE plowed through the ring of men, sending them scuttling from the menace of sharp hoofs. Brad pulled the roan to a sliding stop—hurtled from the saddle. He landed with widespread legs above the little dog. His foot shot out and sent the bobcat rolling end over end.

The big man who had hardly moved during those brief moments jerked erect now. His red-rimmed eyes glittered at the stranger, then his gaze dropped to the twin .45's close to Brad Towler's doubled fists—back again to the lean, bronzed face.

Brad's darting eyes swept the rest of the crowd. He could read surprise, resentment—then anticipation in the faces. And one face, a slender, dark face with tiny black moustache, seemed to hold a hint of approval.

Then he was eyeing the big man again. The man took a halting step forward. His thick-fingered hand wavered toward the six-gun at his thigh as if he wanted to drag it, but was afraid. The hint of a smile flicked Brad's lips. "Go ahead—if you feel lucky!"

The big man's hand jerked away as if a hornet had stung it. He shuffled another step nearer Brad. "You're hornin' into plenty of trouble, stranger—stickin' your nose into something that's none of your business!"

Brad's eyes bored into the man's red-rimmed ones for an instant. When he spoke, his voice was deceptively soft. "It's always my business, when I see a helpless little cuss being pestered by a pack of bullies."

"This here is my bobcat!" the big man blustered. "If a dog jumps him, I aim to let him fight back. If you wasn't an ignorant range tramp, I'd pistol-whip you out of Loder!"

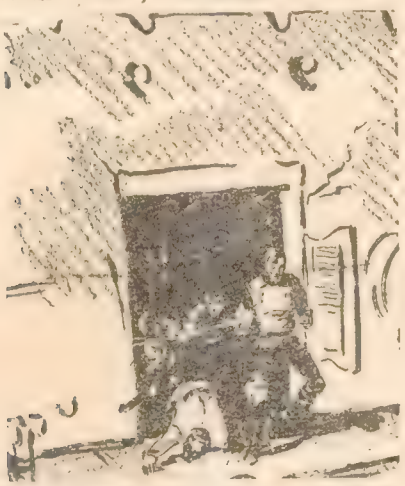
"Don't let my ignorance stop you," Brad said easily.

The big man hesitated for a second. His eyes strayed to the circle of men around him. There was only expectancy on their face—no hint of offered help. His gaze came back to Brad. "I'm giving you one more chance, stranger! You can back out, or—"

Brad Towler's eyes had been upon the big ruffian, and he did not see the circle of men part to let through

a gliding form. But he did tense, as he jerked erect. For there was no mistaking that prodding thing in the small of his back. Brad had felt the muzzle of a gun before.

His gaze did not waver—did not move from the big bully. But every nerve and muscle tensed. Then a voice spoke almost in his ear—a soft, silky voice, but with a thread of suave cruelty in it. "I'll take your guns, stranger; if there's any smoke-talk in Loder, I'll make it."



Brad saw a slim, brown left hand snake past his ribs—stop at the buckle of his gun-belt. Then belt and filled holster dropped at his feet. Now the big man's mouth twisted into a snarling grin. His hairy hand streaked for his holster.

Once more that soft voice came from behind Brad Towler. "You, Bobcat Drake! Hands away from your holsters!"

The huge man's hands jerked upward. A frightened look crossed his slack-jawed face. He took a quick backward step, brushing the bobcat with his leg. A darting paw shot out. Sharp claws slashed the man's jeans—brought a streak of crimson. A ripple of tense laughter swept the crowd.

BRAD TOWLER did not have time to picture in his mind the man whose word carried so much authority in Loder. But he certainly would never have imagined the man who glided past him—who half turned to face both him and Bobcat Drake.

He would not have imagined that slim, almost dapper man with the pasty, expressionless face—the tiny upcurled black mustache—the green, fathomless eyes—the slender hand that held the pearl-handled six-gun so steadily.

When the man spoke again, only his lips moved. His eyes did not blink—seemed as lidless as a snake's. "You're new to Loder, or you'd know it isn't healthy to start a ruckus. What was your idea in jumping Drake?"

Towler's eyes narrowed slightly. "Sort of a weakness," he said softly. "Kind of like to see fair-play—and that little cuss wasn't getting it."

The man's snaky eyes flicked down to the little gray-brindle dog for an instant—then back. For a moment he did not speak. Then he nodded. "Yeah—maybe. But there'll be no killing in Loder today. You'd have drilled Bobcat before he could have dragged his gun. You're a gun-slick, stranger; I know the brand."

Towler nodded. His voice did not hold the slightest hint of bragging. "Never been shaded—yet. You're fast, yourself. Be interesting to match the draw."

"Might happen some day," the expressionless man said softly. "But not now."

Then his lidless eyes swept Brad from the crown of his dusty Stetson to the toes of his inlaid boots. They took in the broad shoulders, the slim hips, the hint of wiry strength and speed in the six feet of bone and muscle. Then he turned to the circle of men. "Scatter!" His voice was not raised, but the steel in it was plain. "And you, Drake—build a cloud of dust with that damned bobcat! I told your boss to keep you out of Loder!"

Brad marveled at the meekness of the hard-bitten crowd. Without argument, without grumbling or muttering, they obeyed. In a scant minute he and the dapper man stood alone in the dusty street—they, and the little dog beneath Brad's feet.

The man jerked his head toward The *One-Eyed Jack* saloon. "Pick up your guns and come inside. I want to talk to you."

2

BRAD TOWLER followed into the cool gloom of the saloon. A half dozen men slouched at the bar. Three or four others leaned their chairs along the north wall. A big-bellied, greasy-aproned bartender wiped the scarred bar aimlessly.

Towler paid no attention to their stares. He trailed the slim man across the sawdust floor, and the little brindle dog hugged his heels.

Inside the little back room, the slim man gestured toward a chair. "Set."

Brad obeyed wordlessly. The pup crouched at his feet, liquid brown eyes turned up trustingly. The other man dropped into a chair across the table. For a full minute he was silent, his green eyes upon Brad's face. Then a smile flicked across his thin lips. He nodded. "From up north. Been riding far and fast. Maybe from up Montana way?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"Double-cinch saddle, prairie country style. Hair chaps. Wide-brimmed J.B. All marks of the open country."

"You read sign well," the young puncher said evenly. "So what?"

"I'm trying to make it easy for you to state your business in Loder." The dapper man leaned across the table. "Suppose I'm kind of tight-mouthed by nature?"

The other did not change expression. "You saw the outfit out in the street jump when I said 'frog'. And they're plenty salty."

"Yeah?" Brad grunted. "An outfit that enjoys watching a bobcat rip a puppy to pieces. A bunch of yellow-bellied bullies. Me, I don't jump so easy."

The dapper little man drummed the table with slender brown fingers. For a tense moment deadly fires flickered in his green eyes. Then he grinned, although there was no humor in the grin. "All right. We'll come to cases. You're from up Montana way—ranny by the name of Brad Towler. Wanted for breaking jail, where you were serving twenty for rustling and murder. Worth a couple of thousand—dead or alive."

Towler jerked erect. His hand darted for his holster. He had thought he had traveled too far and too fast for that word to precede him—that no one on this Arizona range had ever heard of him. He was sure that only one man down here knew there was such a man as Brad Towler. But it looked as if this green-eyed man had him pegged dead to rights.

"Set tight, Towler," the man said softly. "This is no time for swapping lead. You and I can do business."

Brad relaxed a trifle—settled back in his chair. But he waited, tense and tight-lipped. Once more the hint of a smile played across the small man's lips. "That's better. Your secret is safe with me—if we deal. Nobody but me, here in Loder, knows anything about you. But I aim to keep posted on strangers that drift across my range. Knew you were heading this way four or five days ago."

"Yeah? You'll be telling me next that you know why I'm down here in this flea-bitten, God-forgotten desert."

"Might, at that. Might even give you a chance to meet up with Sonora Jackson."

Towler's eyes narrowed. Every line on his face hardened. The words slid between his clenched teeth. "Sonora Jackson! You know about him—and me?"

"Enough. I know that while you were behind bars, he raided your home spread. Gunned your dad and younger brother. Ran off your herd. Why else would you be riding south, unless it was to match your draw with his?"

Towler nodded slowly. "You win. State your proposition."

THE SLENDER man drew a long breath, and Brad was sure he could read a hint of relief in it. Then he leaned across the table. His green eyes bored into Brad's. His voice was hardly more than a whis-

per. "Here's the lay. I ramrod Loder—and all the range hereabouts. Reckon you gathered that from what you saw."

Brad nodded wordlessly.

"Sonora Jackson is kingpin of an outfit that's been operating over across the divide for years. I was willing to let him alone—for a while. But I've a feeling he's not willing."

Again Brad nodded. "Meaning Sonora Jackson is horning into your territory, huh?"

"Not that—so much," the little man said slowly. "But I figure he's found out who I am—and what I know. He's moved his headquarters to Deaf Smith Canyon. Building up his outfit. Getting ready to lock horns with me."

Towler leaned back in his chair. "Listen—whatever your name is—I've never mixed in rustling or murder, no matter what the jury decided about me. And I've got enough personal business with Jackson, without taking on part of yours. I'll play it straight—according to law—and trust to meeting up with Sonora Jackson on my own."

A smile devoid of humor quirked the corners of the dapper man's thin lips. His voice was soft and even. "You've got me wrong, Towler. I run Loder—and the range—but I run them strictly legal. When I shoot—it's lawful. When my dealers win, it's fair and honest."

Towler's brown fingers drummed the table top. His cold blue eyes held upon the slim man. Whatever else he read in that saturnine face, untruth and deceit were not part of it. Ruthlessness—self-centered ambition—but all plain and aboveboard.

Brad Towler came to a sudden decision. He'd play this man's game—as long as it brought him the chance of facing Sonora Jackson—and as long as he stayed within the law. But he would keep his own counsel, would let this man believe that he had told the complete story.

"Don't know what you figure Sonora Jackson has found out—and it's none of my business. But you want him wiped out—and you're afraid to tackle the job yourself."

The slim man jerked as if he had been struck. His thin mouth twisted into a snarl. He half rose from his chair, and his hand streaked for his holster. Brad pushed back his chair, and was ready to match the draw. Then the other man settled back.

"Listen, Towler!" His voice was steel-edged and brittle. "I'm afraid of no man—not Jackson or his whole outfit. They might cut me down—probably would. But I'm not afraid of them." Then he shook his head. "But if I died, the job I set out to do would go unfinished."

In spite of himself, Brad was beginning to respect the dapper little man. He couldn't like him. The man was a lone wolf, who lived for his own ends—cold, deadly, friendless. But at least he was not a crook. And he did offer him a chance to face Jackson.

Brad nodded. "Maybe you're right. If I stop a slug, you'll still be out nothing."

"Just that! But if you listen to me, you'll get an even break with the man you're gunning for. That's all you want, I take it?"

"It'll do for a start. Your proposition—state it."

The slender man rose—catfooted to the door and jerked it wide. His right hand hovered over the butt of his gun. But there was no one close. He shut the door and returned to the table. "Somebody in Loder keeping in touch with Sonora Jackson. Haven't found out who—yet. But when I do—"

He leaned across to Towler, and spoke swiftly. "For once maybe that spy can help. For you're going to jail!"

Brad Towler started, and his eyes narrowed. "I'm going to—"

A thin smile bared the slim man's teeth for an instant. "You're going to jail—tagged as Buck Briggs."

"Buck Briggs? You're talking in riddles. I never heard of Buck Briggs."

Again the green-eyed man smiled. "Maybe not—for you've been in prison for three-four years. But Sonora Jackson has heard of him—plenty. Briggs was a long-rider, as mean and crooked as Jackson. He was a killer that Jackson would give his right

eye to have working with him—rather than against him.

Towler nodded slowly. He was beginning to see. "You say Briggs *was* a long-rider. But now—"

"Planted out in the hills. He was fast with his guns—but not fast enough. I gave him a fair break."

Brad knew the little man was not lying—that he was not bragging. He simply stated the fact for what it was worth.

"All right. I'm Buck Briggs. So what?"

"I have you thrown in jail. The spy carries word to Sonora Jackson. If I know him, he'll send some of his outfit to snake you out of your cell. I make it easy for them. You join up with him. After that, it's up to you."

FOR A FULL minute Brad Towler was motionless. He studied the proposition from every angle. Plenty dangerous. He was sure Sonora Jackson had never seen him, for he was safely in prison when the killer raided the Towler spread and gunned Brad's father and brother.

But what about Briggs? Jackson or some of his outfit might know him. The dapper little man seemed to read his thoughts.

"If you're worried about putting it across, you've nothing to be afraid of. Briggs operated alone. Known only by reputation. He's been in Loder a half dozen times, and no one suspected him—except me. And I suppose you—"

"The only place any of them could have seen me was in prison," Brad answered bitterly.

After another moment's thought, he nodded. "Start the wheel to turning." Then a thin smile quirked his lips. "First time I ever made a deal with a man without knowing his name."

The green-eyed man rose from his chair. First he handed Brad's guns back to him. Then as the young puncher buckled the belt around his middle, he spoke softly. "I'm Crockett—mostly known as 'Apache' Crockett."

Towler blinked. Then he drew a

sharp breath. "Apache Crockett! I've heard—I knew—"

"You knew Tom Crockett. A brother—my only brother. He chose the owl-hoot trail. Rode with Sonora Jackson, until he framed Tom into prison," the green-eyed man said evenly, softly. "I was up north to his trial. That's where I learned about you—and your father and brother."

Brad nodded. "Tom was my cellmate. I got to know him right well. Told me about Sonora Jackson framing him. Proved to me, too, that Jackson was back of my getting sent up. It was from him that I learned that my dad and brother had been gunned and the spread raided. He said that Jackson holed up down Loder way. But he never mentioned—"

"He wouldn't speak of me," Apache said. "He was bitter because I didn't show myself at the trial. Didn't seem to realize that I could be more help to him if Jackson didn't know anything about me."

"He was bitter, right enough," Towler said softly. "I—didn't know—"

"We didn't get along any too well," Crockett muttered. "But I—well, he's my brother—my only living kin. I've been keeping in touch with the prison. That's how I knew you'd made the break. Figured you'd be heading this way. Fact is, a couple of my men sort of smoothed your way here—managed to steer the law off your trail."

Brad looked at the slim man with added respect, and now just a bit of

friendliness. There was a vulnerable spot in the man's armor, after all. "Thanks, Crockett. I owe you and your brother more than I knew. You see, he helped me break prison. Couldn't have made it without him. I promised to—" Brad hesitated a second.

"You promised to try to scare up evidence that he was framed, huh?" Crockett shook his head. "That'll be hard to do. I tried—and failed."

Brad's eyes narrowed. Then a crooked smile played with his lips. There was one thing that Apache Crockett did not know. And if his brother had not seen fit to tell him, it was up to Brad to keep it to himself.

"Yeah, I promised to do all I could."

Crockett's face was cold and expressionless again. "It's not Tom I'm thinking about!" His voice was harsher than necessary, Brad thought. "He played the game crooked. If Jackson hadn't framed him, he'd have been caught sooner or later. All I'm interested in is seeing Sonora Jackson wiped out."

Brad looked at him quizzically, reading what was in the lonely man's thoughts. Then he rose from his chair. "That's my big interest, too. And we're wasting time."

The green-eyed man shoved back his chair, and strode to the door. Brad took a step to follow. He felt something brush his ankles, and looked down. The little brindle dog wagged its stubby tail, and its liquid brown eyes turned up to him pleadingly.

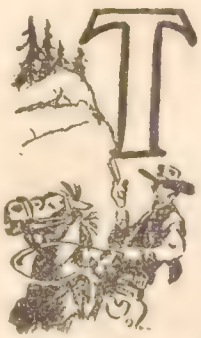
Brad spoke softly. "There's one thing I forgot. When I go to jail, this little feller shares my cell."

Apache Crockett turned on his heel, startled. Then he nodded. "Reckon nobody else has as good a claim on him."

Again he turned to the door. As he shoved it open with his left hand, his right snaked the gun from its holster. He swung the muzzle toward Towler. The bronzed puncher scowled—drew his mouth into a snarl, as he raised his hands above his head.

Crockett's voice bit like the blade of a sharp knife. "You've reached the end of your rope, Buck Briggs! You figured to trick me, but it didn't work!"

3



THE HALF dozen men in the saloon jerked erect and whirled toward the open door. Brad Towler suppressed a grin, as he read the varied emotions on their faces. Amazement — fear —excitement. Then a thick-bodied, curly-haired man with a flat, unintelligent face stepped away from the bar. "What's that, Crockett?"

Brad could see the tarnished star on the man's shirtfront—recognized the swagger that goes with authority that is given to a man not competent to hold it.

"You, Curly Wacker!" Crockett snapped. "Here's a man for your jail. Long-rider by the name of Buck Briggs. You've heard of him—plenty. Made the mistake of riding into Loder with the proposition of swapping me some of his loot for protection."

"Buck Briggs!" Curly Wacker's broad face hardened. "You mean the Briggs that—"

"The only Buck Briggs that you or I know," Crockett answered. "Hold him in jail until I can get in touch with the sheriff up at Salt Springs. There's two thousand reward in it—and a share is yours."

The burly officer swaggered toward Brad, dragging his gun as he came. His thick-fingered hand shot out and disarmed the puncher. Then he spoke importantly. "Get started, feller. It's time buzzards like you learn that they can't pull any of their stuff in Loder."

Brad turned on his heel and strode toward the front door. He could feel the muzzle of the six-gun in the small of his back. He halted at the

door and spoke back over his shoulder. "You'll be sorry for this, Crockett! I offered to throw in with you. But when I break your rickety little jail, I'm hitting the trail for Sonora Jackson's place. I can make a deal with him, plenty quick."

"You'll only leave the Loder jail for a bigger one," Apache said evenly. "Take him along, Wacker!"

The officer's gun prodded deeper, and his growling voice sounded in Brad's ear. Then a growl that was just as deep and twice as wicked rumbled up from the floor. For an instant the pressure of the gun lessened. Brad half turned to look down.

The little brindle dog, still limping on three feet, was making stiff-legged for Wacker. Sharp white teeth were bared in a snarl, and the hair along the little animal's back stood straight up. Wacker's booted foot swung back for a kick—but Brad Towler's cold voice stopped him. "If you touch that dog, I'll tear you apart with my two hands!"

The man turned back, his gun swinging toward Brad. But the young puncher ignored him, as he stooped and called the little dog. "Come here, feller! Nobody's going to hurt you—not as long as I'm standing." He gathered the tiny form into his arms and straightened.

Curly Wacker shot a questioning look at Crockett. The green-eyed man spoke. "Let him take his dog, Wacker; it'll do no harm."

Brad suppressed a humorless grin, and turned to the door. He pushed it open and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Wacker followed, gun still prodding. But again Brad stopped, in spite of the menacing muzzle. For his eyes caught and held upon a slender figure that had stepped out of the store across the street.

He drew a sharp breath. It couldn't be! The cow-country didn't grow such radiantly lovely creatures. He blinked—then looked again.

AS BRAD stood in open-mouthed admiration that was almost awe, the girl turned slowly. She seemed to be looking for something and her red lips pursed in a soft whistle. Brad felt the little dog wriggle in his arms. Then the little animal gave a low whimper of recognition.

The girl's gaze slowly turned toward Brad and his captor. Brad shot a look back over his shoulder at Curly Wacker. The big-bodied officer was smirking, his shoulders back and his chest out. As the girl's eyes widened in surprise, Wacker prodded even harder. "March, Buck Briggs!" His voice carried well across the street.

The girl's lips opened in a startled exclamation. She stepped lightly from the sidewalk and sped across the dusty street. She halted squarely in front of Brad and the big man behind him. Her hands reached toward the little dog.

"Binky! You're a bad little dog! You ran away—" She stopped, and suddenly pain and anger filled her eyes, as she saw streaks of crimson—

"Binky! You're hurt!" Then her eyes turned to Brad Towler, who still carried the animal. "You—you—"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Brad said softly. "It wasn't me who hurt the little feller. It was—"

Curly pushed roughly in front of Brad. His rasping voice had smoothed—was almost suave. "I didn't know it was your dog, Miss Julia. Don't know where Buck Briggs here found him—what he did to him. If you say the word, I'll—"

"Buck Briggs?" The girl's eyes widened, and her face went white. "This—this is Briggs—the—"

Curly Wacker nodded. "Apache Crockett and I caught him, Miss Julia. I'm throwing him in jail, until the sheriff can get down from Salt Springs. Reckon he'll stretch rope."

The white-faced girl snatched the little dog from Brad's arms—backed away from him. He could read loathing—a touch of fear—in her eyes. Still walking backward, she reached the edge of the sidewalk and stepped down into the street.

Suddenly she whirled and raced across to the buckboard. She put the little dog on the seat and climbed in beside him. She gathered up the lines, and the team of buckskin broncs whirled into the southwest trail.

Brad watched until Wacker prodded him again. "On your way, Briggs! And consider yourself lucky that Julia Woodburn isn't a man. If old Tom Woodburn had left a son instead of a daughter, you'd have stopped a slug."

"Woodburn? Julia Woodburn?" Brad's voice was low and a little shaky. "Don't remember ever hearing that name before."

Wacker laughed scornfully. "You don't remember the names of all the men you've bushwhacked, Briggs. Tom Woodburn owned the Lazy L spread that you raided—was the man you cut down with a bullet in the back."

"So that—was Tom Woodburn—Julia Woodburn's father!"

"The same—and I won't be responsible for what happens when Julia tells her Uncle Dave that you're in the Loder jailhouse."

Towler's eyes narrowed, and his shoulders slumped as he shuffled along the sidewalk. This was something he hadn't counted on. Hadn't expected to meet the only girl who had ever caused his heart to miss a beat—and be branded as her father's killer at almost the same instant.

CURLY WACKER herded the young puncher into the little adobe jail, prodded him back to the single cell, and locked the barred door behind him. Brad Towler's mind was far away. He hardly noticed where he was, until the lock clicked. Then a wry grin split his face.

He strode to the rough bunk against the wall, and slumped upon it. "Julia Woodburn!"

Then the smile widened. "Binky! What a sissy name for a dog with the sand of that little feller. When I see Julia Woodburn again, I'll give her a real name for him. Binky! Why, he'd ought to be called—called Bowie, after old Colonel Bowie—the way he faced that bobcat's slashing claws and teeth. Bowie—that's his rightful name."

But now Towler forced the girl and the little dog from his mind. He could not forget them entirely—did not even want to. But there was something much more important to think out—

Memory could wipe them out—the bitter memory of the last few years—and months. Brad dropped his chin into his cupped hands and stared at the floor. He let the events of the past unroll in front of him like pictures on a curtain.

His trial, up Montana way—his sentence of twenty years in prison for a crime he had assumed to shield his young saddle pard—a crime that he later learned had been committed by someone else entirely.

Then came the three heartbreaking years behind the bars—and his meeting with young Tom Crockett. He let his memory linger for a moment on the slim youngster who had become his cell mate. There was something likeable about Tom—something boyish and appealing.

Something that had made him believe, when Tom told him that a frameup had brought him to prison—that Sonora Jackson had arranged it, after Tom had quit the Jackson outfit.

A lump had risen in Brad's throat, when Tom showed him a locket that

he carried on a buckskin thong around his neck. For he had seen the film of moisture in the youngster's eyes, the trembling lips, as he showed Brad the picture of the dark-haired girl in the locket.

"You—you love the girl?" he had asked.

Tom had nodded. "Yeah. We were going to get married. She lived down close to the line with her brother. But I made the mistake of telling Sonora I was quitting."

"He wanted the girl, too?" Brad asked.

Tom shook his head. "Jackson is interested in nothing but money—and liquor. But he was afraid I'd tell what I know, if I quit him. So he framed me."

"But what keeps you from telling now?" Brad has asked.

Tom Crockett's lips had trembled at the question. "When Jackson had me sent up, he told me that the girl—that Ruth Morgan would be safe only as long as I kept shut. And—and so I don't dare to tell."

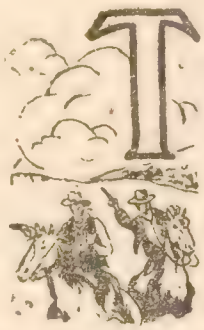
It had been days later, in the quiet of their cell, that Tom had related how Jackson and his outfit had raided the Towler spread—had killed Brad's father and younger brother. For a moment Brad had seen red—was almost ready to tear Tom apart.

But the youngster convinced him that the raid had occured after he quit the Jackson outfit—that he had nothing to do with it.

It was then that plans for Brad's escape had been born. Through weary weeks he and Tom had plotted; until the tense night when Brad had made the break. He could close his eyes now and live through those dreadful minutes when bullets were spattering around him.

And just as plain in his memory were Tom's last words, as he handed Brad the locket. "Take this, Brad. If you win free—if you meet up with Sonora Jackson—you'll also find Ruth Morgan. For Jackson will stay close to where she lives—down Loder way. Show her the locket, if the chance comes. She'll know you're a friend of mine, then. The last night I saw her—the night I headed for prison—I promised that I would get word to her if I could—that I would send the locket as a token."

4



THROUGHOUT the long, sweltering afternoon, Brad Towler sat on the crude bunk, chin sunk in his cupped hands. He hardly sensed the passing of time; his brain was filled with seething, jumbled thoughts. Deadly anger and hatred for Sonora Jackson. A queer mixture of respect and mistrust for Apache Crockett.

And another feeling that he could not name—for he had never experienced it before—for Julia Woodburn. Threaded through all were sincere affection and admiration for the little brindle dog that he thought of now as "Bowie."

The purple haze of dusk filled the valley and crept up the slopes of the towering Sangre de Cristos without him noticing it. With the sinking of the sun, the high, thin air cooled swiftly. The coolness seeped through the barred window and brought a shiver to Towler's spine. But still he was not conscious of it.

He scarcely heard the door of the little office in front of the cell open—paid no attention to the swift click of booted heels on the slab floor. Hardly stirred as the footsteps came again, faded a little—then died out as the door slammed shut once more.

It was the thud of hoofs in the street outside—many hoofs—that finally beat through his consciousness. He straightened with a jerk, for there was a desperate urgency in the sound. He rose and moved to the barred window, peered out into the gathering gloom.

A dozen purposeful horsemen rode up the center of the street from out

of the southwest trail. He could barely make them out—huge shadowy forms hunched forward over their saddle-horns. Shadows that swayed with the movement of the horses. They rode silently, with only the thud of hoofs and the creak of saddle leather to mark their coming.

They seemed to be heading for the *One-Eyed Jack* Saloon—not looking to right or left—not talking—not laughing—not cursing. Just riding. Towler did not know them—of that he was sure.

He turned back to the cell door that looked out into the office. But even as he peered through the narrow barred square, he knew the office was empty. In the back of his consciousness was the memory of the slamming door.

There was the rickety desk that was Curly Wacker's—a litter of papers that were dim in the growing darkness. A faint reflection of the already dead sun came from the bowl of the brass oil lamp that sat on one corner of the desk. An empty chair in front of the desk. But no occupant.

And now it came to him that during that long afternoon he had heard no sound from out there—not even the scuffing of feet, the sound of a voice. Not a sound except for that brief minute when the door opened, feet thumped, and the door slammed closed again.

Brad was not imaginative. His nerves were as steady as a granite boulder—most always. But somehow this strange quietness that he had not noticed before left him upset.

HE TURNED on his heel and went back to the window. The riders had passed now. There was no more sound of hoofs—only a faint haze of dust; he twisted his head, trying to see up the street.

Just a narrow strip of the nearest corner of the *One-Eyed Jack*. Only the closest post of the hitchrail in front of it. The rest was tantalizingly out of his vision. But a slash of orange light from the side window of the saloon painted the arid earth—

There was nothing to see, but Brad stood with face close to the bars, his eyes wide and unblinking.

How long he stood there, Towler was not sure. It might have been only five minutes; It might have been a half hour. However long it was, the darkness had deepened and the bright stars had popped out of the blackness of the sky.

Then he was conscious of a sound coming from just beyond the reach of his vision up there toward the saloon. It was a strange sound—a sound that he could not quite place at first. Unmistakably human—welling up like a murmur and dying to a whisper, only to swell again. A sound like, but still unlike that of the brutal crowd that had watched the baiting of the little brindle dog out there in the street.

But this sound was deeper, more primitive, more deadly. And now he knew what it meant.

A lynch mob! And he was that object; he knew it now. He was Buck Briggs, rustler, robber, killer. Word of his capture had swept the range in that swift and unexplainable way such news travels.

And now the mob was gathering for retribution. Towler knew that, and for the first time in his memory he was afraid. Locked up—behind bars—without any weapon except his bare hands.

He turned swiftly on his heel and strode back to the door of the cell, looked out into the office again. Still no one there. No lights, no movement. Only the shapeless shadows of the rickety old desk and the chair. Not even a gleam now from the brass lamp.

He shook the cell door furiously, calling out for Curly Wacker—and was startled at the echoing sound of the rattling door, and his own voice in the empty jail. Not an answer. He shook the door again, and this time it was Apache Crockett's name that he called. Only dead silence followed.

He whirled again, and fairly raced to the window. The sound from up at the *One-Eyed Jack* had risen a little— He could sense that the mob

There was no time for Brad to explain now...

He made his way through the bars as the mob started to batter down the jailhouse door.

was worked up almost to the breaking point.

Then a figure detached itself from the corner of the saloon. Taking to the shadows, speeding silently, it raced toward him. In the darkness he could make out only the big form—

Then the figure passed out of his vision. Heavy footsteps pounded on the narrow porch. Brad Towler heard the door jerked wide. Could hear the man's heavy breathing, as he leaped inside. Then the slam of the door again.

THE YOUNG puncher was at the cell door now, his hands clutched so tightly on the bars that his knuckles gleamed white in the darkness. He heard the man clump swiftly across the room to the desk—heard him fumble with the drawer.

"Wacker! What is it? What's going on?" Brad's voice was thin as it came through tight lips.

The man straightened and whirled toward the cell. Brad could faintly see him buckling another gun-belt around his middle, as he strode toward the barred cell. He caught the low curse, as the man stumbled over the battered old brass cuspidor. Then he stood in front of the cell door. Brad could see the white blotch of his face.

"What is it, Wacker? Are they—" There was a note of desperation in Towler's tense voice.

"Wacker's gone—left soon after he locked you up!" The voice was strange to Brad. "Must have taken the keys to your cell with him! Can't find 'em in his desk!"

"The keys? You mean—you aimed to—"

"Listen, Briggs!" the man growled. "I haven't any more sympathy for you than I have for a dogie-killing coyote. But a lynch mob never does any good. Figured on loosing you—but there's not a chance now."

"You're going to let the mob take me—going to let them string me up to a—"

"Not much else I can do," the stranger grunted. "But I'll try to stop 'em. Won't do much good—but I hate to think of Dave Woodburn having this on his conscience the rest of his life."

"Look for the keys again! I've got to get out! There's something you don't know—that Dave Woodburn don't know!" Brad felt that shiver of cold dread again. Outside the bars, a six-gun in his hand, the odds would mean nothing to him. But shut up, helpless like a rat in a cage—

"There's something I do know," the man answered. "You're yellow—yellow clean through. I saw you face down Bobcat Drake—and I admired the way you did it. Until I found out your name. You'd gun a man down, and laugh about it. But when it comes to facing the music yourself, it's another matter."

"But you can't—you don't—"

"Nothing much I can do, even if I try. There's more than a dozen of them—and as many more folks from town to help. And they're stirred up—plenty. I'll talk to them, of course. They know me—respect me. Been their postmaster for twenty years. Know everyone of them. But when it comes to talking down a mob—"

"But Apache Crockett! He knows! He'll tell them there's been a mistake! He'll see that—"

"Crockett rode out of town the middle of the afternoon—rode hell-bent down the southwest trail. Haven't seen him since. Anyhow, Crockett wouldn't lift a hand. He don't like you—don't like any owl-hoot riders. Cold as steel, himself—a gambler and a saloon-keeper. But a square shooter."

The sound from outside the jail had grown now to a muted rumble like thunder in the far-off Sangre de Cristos. Now Towler began to hear the steady clump of booted feet on the wooden sidewalk. He turned from the cell door and hurried to the window. All he could see was the back corner of the *One-Eyed Jack*—and the patch of darkness between it and the jail.

Then he was back at the door. The stranger—the postmaster of Loder—had moved away from the bars to the front door. Brad could see his shadow there—wide-legged, hunch-shouldered. He knew that the man might stop the mob for a few minutes by dint of the respect they had for him. But only for a few minutes.

STRANGELY now his nerves were steady. The fear had slipped from him. Death was close—he knew that. An agonizing death at the end of a rope. A death that he did not deserve, but could not ward off.

The footsteps died down, but the rumble of voices had grown almost to a growling roar. Brad Towler moved to the bunk beside the barred window. It was not fear that drove him. More like resignation. Certainly he would fight to the last when they broke down the cell door and came for him. Fight with his bare hands.

Then he heard the old postmaster's voice addressing the mob through the locked door of the office. "I

know what you're after, Dave Woodburn! I know you came for Buck Briggs! Know you aim to string him high! But you can't do it, Woodburn! It's not legal—it's not right! Your conscience will gnaw at you for the rest of your life! Let the law take its course!"

There was a sudden silence outside. Then a single voice. A voice that held in its timber the weight of years, yet was steady and deep. Brad knew instinctively that it was Woodburn's.

"Buck Briggs gunned my brother—shot him in the back. Run off all the Lazy L stock. Left Julia an orphan—and almost broke. He's gunned many another since—but the law has done nothing. This time the law would free him again—would let him cheat the rope. But we're taking the law into our own hands."

"You can't do it, Dave! You haven't thought it out—you let your anger—"

"I've thought it out every day since my brother was killed," Woodburn answered. "We're taking him! Open the door, or we'll break it in!"

5

THE OLD postmaster continued to argue, out there by the door. But Brad Towler knew that he would not use his guns—if he wore any. The roar was becoming louder by the second. He could hear the crash, as men lunged against the door.

Then he whirled swiftly, and faced the little barred window. For another sound had reached him. A low voice, almost a whisper—but it cut its way through the turmoil. It came to him from the window—came with an urgency that could not be denied.

"Briggs! Buck Briggs!"

Towler blinked there in the darkness. His heart skipped a beat. He caught his breath sharply. Indistinct and low as the voice was, there was no mistaking that it was a woman's.

He reached the window in a single stride—peered through the bars into the purple darkness. A shadow, scarcely darker than the gloom that blanketed it, loomed up in his line of vision.

Then he knew that it was a rider—a slender rider who leaned from the saddle toward the barred window. He strained his eyes to make out more, but the shadow remained nebulous. Then the voice came again.

"Buck Briggs!" This time it was almost a question.

"Here! Who—what—"

"There's no time to lose! Another minute—"

A hand reached out—a slender hand that moved swiftly. Brad Towler saw the end of a saddle rope thrust through the bars—pass behind three of them, and back out. He saw a knot tied with sure speed. Then the voice again. "Get ready to slip through! Move fast when the bars give way!"

Now he sensed what the strange rider—the slender rider with the soft woman's voice—intended to do. He drew a long, quavering breath. It would work! In a moment he would be outside—not cooped up like a trapped coyote. Out in the open where he could fight back.

The mob might get him—probably would. But he was not afraid. His only fear had been that of being walled in.

The horse and its strange rider backed away from the window. Brad Towler's fingers touched the rope that looped around three of the bars. He felt it tighten, and he held his breath. There was a good chance that the rope might break before the bars were loosened. The walls of the jail were of adobe, but were thick and solid. Likely the bars, were set deep.

Now he felt the rope stretch a little. He was almost sure he could hear the creak of parting hemp, as the horse pulled against it. The mob at the door was growling like a cougar worrying its kill. The old post-

master's voice was stilled now, and Brad knew that the man had given up trying to stop those grim men.

At almost the instant he heard the front door crash in, the bars in the window gave way. At first they moved slowly, jerkily. Then, as the adobe crumbled, they jerked loose with a swift, tearing movement.

Where rods of steel had held him prisoner, only a twelve inch gap yawned. It was narrow—treacherously narrow for a body as wide-shouldered, thick-chested as Towler's. But he went into it head first. The remaining bars seemed to clutch at him like live fingers.

He emptied his lungs with a mighty blast—drew in his chest—twisted his shoulders. He wriggled and squirmed—tugged and clawed. Inch by painful inch he thrust his body through the narrow opening.

The roar of the mob, inflamed still more by its success in breaking down the door of the little office, lent a desperate speed to his efforts. He heard booted feet racing down the short hall toward the cell. In a dozen breaths they would be beating at the bars.

With a last tremendous burst of energy, he wormed his body through, then dropped the five feet to the ground, landing on his neck and shoulders. In an instant he was on his feet, and whirling toward the rider.

THE HORSE loomed directly above him. Even as he turned, the slender rider swung from the saddle and stood in front of him. A slim hand thrust out, handing him the reins. A voice that he recognized, now that it came above a whisper, spoke swiftly. "Take this horse! There's a gun and cartridge belt on the saddle-horn! Take him—and ride!"

"You're—Julia Woodburn! Why did you—"

"No time to talk! No time to explain! You deserve hanging—and you'll get it, sooner or later. But I don't want it on Uncle Dave's conscience! Now ride!"

"But you—this is your horse—

you'll be afoot, and—"

"I've got another horse that I led! Back behind the postoffice! Nobody knows—nobody will see—"

Brad Towler whirled swiftly now, and grasped the saddlehorn. Then he shot a question at the girl. "Why did you tell Dave Woodburn I was here in jail? Didn't you know he'd—"

"I didn't tell him," the girl said quickly. "It was Bobcat Drake. He was at the Lazy L when I got there. Apache Crockett rode in soon after. Tried to talk Uncle Dave out of it. They locked Crockett in the saddle house. That's when I came back to Loder."

"I—thank you—for my life," Brad Towler said unsteadily. "Someday I'll—" He turned and swung into the saddle.

"I hope I never see you again! Hope that the next I hear of you will be your *legal* hanging!" There was bitterness and hatred in her voice.

Brad Towler felt the ribs of the horse swelling between his knees—the stirrups beneath his feet—the

reins in his hands. He lifted the filled gun-belt from the saddle-horn, and buckled it around his middle. Then his shoulders squared, and his chin came high. In the darkness there was a faint, bitter smile on his lips. But the girl could not see it.

He leaned from the saddle toward her. His voice was low, but it carried above the angry cries of the frustrated mob inside the jail. "Take good care of the little dog—of little Bowie—until I see you again."

"Bowie?" It seemed that Julia spoke in spite of herself. "What do you—"

But already Brad Towler had set the rowels in the horse's ribs. Before the last words left the girl's lips, he was fading in the gloom. She whirled and raced through the darkness toward her own mount, tethered behind the postoffice a half block away.

For the first tempestuous half mile, Towler's only thought was putting distance between himself and the howling mob. He knew that he could count on no more than a scant ten minutes before Woodburn and his men would be in the saddle—no more than ten minutes of safety from pursuit.

The feel of the horse between his knees, the weight of the gun at his thigh were good—at first. But the horse was not his own—not the rangy roan that had carried him through two hundred miles of rough going. A horse that was capable of bursts of tremenduous speed as well as days of dependable plodding.

The gun was heavy at his side—but it was not his own, either. The butt did not have the familiar feel, the weight was not distributed as he would have liked it. He did not have the confidence in it that his own instilled.

All this he realized before the first half mile was behind him. And now came another disturbing realization. The range ahead was a strange one. He did not know the trails, the location of the water holes—had no idea where food could be found for himself and his horse.

APACHE CROCKETT had said that Sonora Jackson's headquarters were across the divide. That would be roughly west. But west covered a lot of territory—unknown, unfriendly territory. He would be just as safe back in Loder as out here in the darkness.

Back in Loder! He pulled his horse to a sliding stop. For a dozen breaths he was silent and motionless in the saddle. Then he half turned. His eyes caught and held the faint flickers of light that marked the little cow town. His ears, sharpened by danger, caught the faint beat of hoofs. He knew that his minutes of safety were almost gone.

He had not tried to hide his leaving—did not have time. It was not in the cards that his going had missed every pair of eyes—and a single pair was enough to set the mob on his trail. Dave Woodburn and his outfit knew his direction by now—and were already heading his way.

Safer back in Loder! That thought was not as loco as it sounded. Chances were good that every man in the little town who was able to fork a saddle was with Woodburn. Brad neckreined the horse from the trail, and angled straight to the north for a good quarter of a mile.

There he pulled up on the shoulder of a low dune that rose out of the parched flat-land. Now, only a dim and shapeless shadow in the purple darkness of night, he watched and listened. A scant three minutes seemed like hours. The pound of hoofs came more plainly through the thin, high air. The call of a man and the answering hail, the faint creak of leather that seemed unnaturally loud to Towler's danger-sharpened ears, the snort of horses that had breathed their nostrils full of dust—all these sounds marked the path of the grim riders.

They swept on down the southwest trail, and the sounds died with their going. But Brad sat motionless for still another five minutes. Then he headed straight north again. The pinpricks of light from the town guided him. A mile—two

miles—and still Loder was no further away. Now he began to edge his horse into a tighter circle, drawing still closer to the town.

Another quarter of a mile. A dim trail crossed his path, stretching like a faintly lighter streak in the black velvet of the night. He recognized it as the trail by which he had entered Loder only twelve hours before—the trail from the northeast.

For just a moment he pulled his borrowed horse to a stop. Once more he considered every angle—compared the danger of the strange range with the menace of the unfriendly little town. At last he turned his horse into the south.

He rode more slowly now, pausing every hundred yards or to stare at the flickering lights—to look at any shadow that passed in front of them—listening for any strange sound. No shadows marked movement, no sounds spelled danger. Now Loder lay directly across his path, the huge livery barn looming in front of him.

WHILE Brad Towler rode back into Loder—while Dave Woodburn and his men searched the valley—still other grim riders were in their saddles. For Sonora Jackson and his outfit were riding—spurred by word brought to the hideout by Bobcat Drake—and another.

Bobcat arrived late, for he made a stop that he did not dare mention to Jackson—and that stop forced an evasion to his lips. But even then he reached the hideout before the sun had fallen. Jackson listened scowlingly to Drake's recital.

"I tell you, he was a stranger—but a real gunslick," Drake declared. "Even that cold-eyed buzzard, Apache Crockett, handled him with gloves. Got the drop on me, or I'd have pistol-whipped him out of town."

"You had no business in Loder," Jackson growled. "Told you to stay clear. We're not ready for a showdown with Apache Crockett—yet."

"But boss, I thought you'd ought to know what's goin' on in—"

"I've got other ways of finding out," Jackson answered. Then he leaned toward Drake, and his scowl deepened. "You never saw the man before? You're sure you've got no idea who he is? I've got a feeling that you're lying to me. And if I ever find out that you are—" His voice trailed off ominously.

Bobcat Drake's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. He knew it was dangerous to lie to Jackson. But it was even more dangerous to admit that he had stayed on in Loder a little while until he learned the stranger's identity—and that he had ridden by the Lazy L with word for Dave Woodburn.

At last he shook his shaggy head. "Plumb stranger, Sonora. Tall, with yellow hair—as smooth as greased lightning. A real—"

"Tall—yellow-haired—a gunslick!" Sonora Jackson muttered. "Sounds like—it might be—Buck Briggs!"

"Buck Briggs!" The breath hissed from Bobcat Drake's lips. He feared for a moment that Jackson had read his thoughts. Then he nodded slowly. "It could be him. But what would he be doing—"

Jackson's fingers drummed on the slab table in front of him. The scowly deepened. "He might be hiring his gun out to Apache Crockett. Might mean that the showdown has come, after all."

Again Drake was tempted to tell Jackson the rest of what had happened. But again he fought down that impulse. He had no stomach to face the outlaw leader with a lie in his teeth.

Then Sonora Jackson crashed his chair back and leaped to his feet. With the lithe tread of a catamount he paced across the room—then back. His chin thrust out, as he faced Drake again. "I've been wanting to meet up with that green-eyed, snake-

bellied Crockett, anyhow. Getting too blasted big for his boots. I've got plenty to settle with him for—and I aim to do it with bullets. Now if he's hired Buck Briggs—"

Now he whirled and shot an order to another man who leaned against the wall near the door. "Round up the outfit, Ackerman! Pronto! We're riding for Loder—tonight!"

DURING the next hour, Sonora Jackson paced the room like a caged beast. Then another rider swept up the trail from Loder—a thick-bodied, flat-faced man with curly black hair. Jackson met him at the door. "You've got more news, Wacker? Something Bobcat Drake—"

Curly Wacker, Loder's marshal, swung down from his lathered horse. "Plenty news, Jackson—good news. Buck Briggs is in the Loder jail. Apache Crockett had him locked up. Briggs is threatening to break jail and join up with you. Thought you'd like to hear of it—quick."

A twisted smile split Jackson's face. "All right, Wacker! You'll get paid—as usual. Now head back to Loder. Tell Briggs that Sonora Jackson and his outfit are riding to free him. Tell him we're offering him a chance to get even with Crockett—with the understanding that he joins up with us, and takes my orders."

When the Loder marshal climbed into his saddle and headed back down the trail, Jackson turned back into the room and faced Bobcat Drake. "My guess was right. The stranger *is* Buck Briggs, and Crockett jailed him. We'll snake him out of his cell. Gives us a chance to put him under obligations to us—keep him from getting any ideas in his head. We can use a gunslick like him real handy."

Bobcat Drake grinned with relief. Jackson had the straight of it now, would question him no more. He nodded. "Yeah, and we'll be hitting Crockett right where he lives, too—taking the reward money out of his pocket. But Buck Briggs, boss—you'd better watch him close. He's a smooth hombre." Then as an afterthought, Drake spoke slowly. "And he don't like me—none."

Sonora Jackson looked at the big ruffian, the hint of a smile playing with his lips. "You're afraid of him, Drake. So he must be plenty salty. But it's up to you to look out for yourself. I don't want a man around me that I have to baby like a dogie."

"I'll look out for myself, right enough," Bobcat muttered. "Next time he won't get the drop on me—next time I'll—"

Sonora Jackson and his outfit rode soon after dark. Rode in full force, and heavily armed. But they rode slowly and warily. It was not in the cards that Loder would be unguarded this night—not with Buck Briggs in the jailhouse.

And deep in Jackson's heart was more than a little fear of Crockett. No physical coward in any sense, still the big outlaw leader could not quite understand the dapper man's rigid code—could not help but respect his cold efficiency with the six-gun.

He timed the arrival in Loder at somewhere around midnight. By that time most of the ranchers should be home—the *One-Eyed Jack* should be closed for the night, and the town should be as near asleep as it ever became.

But when they dropped down the shoulder of the foothills into the

arid valley, their caution was redoubled. For they brushed the outlying riders of the posse that was searching for Buck Briggs. And while Jackson did not have the slightest idea of their mission, he sensed the excitement that rode with them.

He gathered his outfit around him. He questioned Bobcat Drake again. But Drake still did not dare tell his boss what he knew. "There's something going on," Jackson growled. "Something that might not be none too healthy for us. Don't know what it is—but I aim to find out."

Then he turned to Bobcat. "You, Drake and Ackerman—you'll ride with me. We're going on into town. The rest of you circle and hit the southwest trail. Hole up just beyond that arroyo that cuts across the trail half way down to the Lazy L. We'll meet you there in a couple of hours."

"You'd better take someone else," Bobcat said hesitantly. "If Crockett should see me back in town—"

"You're riding with me," Jackson growled. "If Apache Crockett sees any of us, there'll be lead-swapping. And you're good enough with a gun, even if you do have a streak of yellow down your back."

When the rest of the outfit faded into the Darkness, Sonora Jackson lanky, lantern-jawed Ackerman and Bobcat Drake headed for Loder.

WHILE Sonora Jackson and his two companions were moving cautiously toward Loder from the west, Brad Towler approached the rickety old livery stable from the north. Loder was deadly silent. He pulled into the deeper darkness behind the huge structure. Here he swung from his horse and ground-anchored it. Flattening himself against the rough slabs, he inched around the northwest corner.

From this point he looked straight down the street to the turn beyond which lay the *One-Eyed Jack* saloon. He made out the shapeless forms of the buildings that he had passed that morning—the saddle shop, the drug store, the blacksmith shop—and on down to the jailhouse.

Flickering lights of smoky oil lamps were visible in one or two of the buildings. But there was no movement on the street. No saddled horses at the hitchrails, no grim men tramping the sidewalks. No sounds, either. Loder was a deserted town—or one asleep.

Deserted, all right, Brad Towler thought grimly. Not a man would be sleeping in Loder that night. Everyone who could fork a horse would be out searching for him—every man bent on his destruction.

Those men would expect him to ride fast—to put as many miles as possible between himself and town. And after his boast in the *One-Eyed Jack*, they would look for him in the direction of Jackson's hideout.

He edged slowly on around the corner of the livery stable—moved stealthily toward the big door at the front. Still no sound or movement to spell danger. For a long moment he stopped, his hand on the leather strap that lifted the latch. He drew a long breath—tugged at the strap. The door creaked open.

Again he paused. Sounds came from inside the pitch dark barn. The stamping of hoofs, the snuffling of horses as they nosed at the mangers or feed boxes, the thump as one animal bumped the side of a stall. Then a low nicker that he recognized.

His own roan! Someone had brought him to the livery stable. Towler was luckier than he dared hope. He moved softly into the impenetrable gloom. With his hand touching the wall of the passageway behind the stalls, he inched forward.

Again the low nicker—this time almost beside him. He stopped, spoke softly to the roan. Now he searched the wall with questing fingers. They touched a saddle. He examined it carefully—found the irregular scratch

on the cantle where his spur had raked it weeks before. Identified the slicker thongs, one of which had been torn loose. Proved it still further by the patched back cinch.

Now he found the bridle that hung close. The peculiar Spanish bit that he had bought in the little saddle shop in Denver was all he needed to know that it was his own. He lifted the heavy saddle from its peg—dragged the Navajo saddle blanket with it.

He turned and felt his way to the low door of the box stall. A soft nose nuzzled him. "Steady, Rusty!" he half whispered. "Take it easy, boy!"

He moved along the horse's side, dropped the saddle to the stall floor—tossed the blanket over the animal's back. Then he swung the saddle up, caught the cinches beneath the roan's belly, and fastened them swiftly. In another instant the bit was between the animal's teeth, and the throat-latch buckled.

BRAD TOWLER'S shoulders were a little squarer, his chin a little higher as he led his own horse out of the Loder Livery and Feed Barn. The night outside seemed lighter in comparison with the blackness of the barn's interior. The shadowy structures of the town loomed up a little clearer.

But still there was no movement down there. With swift decision Brad swung into the saddle. It was good to feel the familiar seat, the swing of the horse that he knew so well. Only one thing was lacking, and he determined to remedy that quickly.

For the second time in one round of the clock, Towler rode down Loder's single street. But this time he did not keep to the center. Instead, he hugged the deeper shadows close to the buildings. A second time he paused at the bend in the street that hid the *One-Eyed Jack* saloon.

But now there was no mumble of voices, no pain-filled yelp of a tiny dog, no loud and brutal laugh. Nothing but almost painful silence.

Brad Towler's hand dropped swiftly to the butt of the borrowed six-gun. It was not his—but good enough, for a little while. Now he touched the roan with roweled heels, and moved around the turn.

A flicker of light painted an orange slash on the sidewalk of the *One-Eyed Jack*. Brad pulled to a stop. For a tense minute he sat his saddle, ears alert to catch any sound. None came. Slowly he moved forward again, his hand tight on the reins. He pulled his horse out into the street a little as he approached the saloon.

As he passed, his eyes narrowed, peering through the grimy windows. As far as he could make out, the *One-Eyed Jack* was just as deserted as the rest of Loder. He drifted on past—then circled and pulled up behind the building. There in the deep shadow, he swung down and dropped the reins at the roan's front hoofs.

If his progress was slow before, it was a snail's pace now. Inch by cautious inch he moved around the corner of the *One-Eyed Jack*—moved until he could thrust his head forward a little and peer through the glass of the front window.

At first the saloon seemed to be entirely tenantless. But still Towler did not make for the door. Instead he stood there, knees bent, right hand on his gun-butt, head thrust forward and eyes unblinking. He was seeing the inside of the drab little saloon—remembering every detail of what had happened there after his meeting with Apache Crockett.

THEY HAD come out of the little back room. Brad could see the door from where he stood now. Curly Wacker had disarmed him—had turned and tossed the gun-belt and filled holster onto the poker table back by that door. Now Brad drew a deep breath as the last memory came to him.

Apache Crockett had picked up the gun-belt, and had turned back into the little room. When he had come out a moment later, his hands were empty. Brad's own gun was in there now—of that he was certain.

He straightened a little—edged along the wall toward the front door.

And then he saw it—the form slumped in the big, scarred chair back near the rear door. He froze, out there on the slab sidewalk—froze, with his right hand clutching the butt of his six-gun.

For a full minute he stared at that motionless form. Then a twisted smile flicked his thin lips. For now there came a movement—a vague movement that somehow told Brad what he wanted to know. That man, there in the chair was not in the saddle and out with the posse because he had drunk too deeply of Apache Crockett's wares, and was sleeping it off.

Brad Towler started his slow movement again, but now he did not take his eyes from the drunken man. Another dozen feet, and at the changed angle he could make out the man's face dimly in the orange light of the smoky oil lamp. A heavy face with sagging jaws and mouth opened in drunken snoring. Brad could even catch an occasional loud snort from the thick lips.

He reached out for the latch of the door—hesitated a second—then lifted it. The door swung open and Brad stepped silently inside. The man's snores were louder now, but there was a note in them that told the young puncher that the drunken slumber was nearing its end.

Brad moved swiftly now, but his steps were as light and as silent as a cat's. He reached the door to the little back room—opened it quickly. As he stepped inside and pulled the door shut noiselessly, he caught the scrape of the man's feet on the slab floor.

He stood inside in the pitch dark, his ear against the door. Unsteady footsteps came to him now—a low, meaningless mumble as the drunken man shuffled across the slabs. Then the clink as of the neck of a bottle striking the rim of a glass. More of the hair of the dog that bit him, Brad thought. Another drink would either wake the man or put him into a still deeper slumber.

One way or the other, he would be safe in Crockett's little office. Drunk or sober, no man who knew the dapper, deadly owner of the *One-Eyed Jack* would dare invade his domain.

Brad felt his way carefully across the room, picturing its lay as he remembered it. The big table to the left of center—one chair behind the table—another on his side. A shelf across the far corner—a curtain cutting across the other corner. Nothing else.

Towler's outstretched hands found the back of the chair. He circled it silently, until his fingers were upon the edge of the table. Now they moved swiftly over the top—found the inkwell and the stubby-pointed pen that Apache Crockett had toyed with—an dog-eared account book. And then—a gun-belt with its filled holster!

Brad's fingers trembled ever so little as he examined that gun ever so carefully. The walnut butt that fitted his hand so snugly, the just-right curve to the hair-trigger—the filed-off back sight—the perfect balance that only a man's own gun possesses.

Brad unbuckled the gun-belt that was around his middle, and replaced it with his own. He turned back to

the door now. But even as his hand went out for the latch, he stopped. He caught his breath sharply. His nerves and muscles tensed. The sound was not the drunken man out there in the *One-Eyed Jack*. A single man would not have bothered him—especially a man unsteady and bleary-eyed from Crockett's forty-rod.

This sound that reached his keenly attuned ears was more sinister, more deadly. The pound of hoofs on the street—at least three sets of hoofs, maybe more. And the horses were breaking from a gallop into a trot—then into a walk. Turning in to the hitchrail, Brad Towler knew.

He had counted on more time before the posse would come riding back to Loder—another hour at least. But for once luck had deserted him.

HIS HAND came back slowly, dropped to his side. For the thud of booted feet on the sidewalk came plainly now—then the creak of the front door as it swung slowly open. Dead silence for a moment.

Brad Towler could picture those riders, with the gleam of hatred, the lust for his life still in their eyes. A little shiver chased itself up and down his spine. He was just as much trapped as he had been back in the jail. Except—

Except that these riders did not know he was in Apache Crockett's little back room, would not so much as suspect that he would dare to remain in Loder. He stood there at the door, silent and motionless, his ear against the slab.

The single moment of silence from outside—then the pound of heavy feet on the floor. He could distinguish the sound of three pairs of feet. Now a voice that he had never heard before. A rough, dust-husked voice that raised his hackles instinctively. "Only one man—an' him plumb pie-eyed. We'll never—"

A grunt was the only answer. Then a single pair of feet tramped the floor again. Then the sound of a slap against solid flesh—a yowl of surprise and pain. Another slap and another howl.

"Wake up, you pot-bellied swill barrel! Onto your hind-legs! I'm hunting information—and you're the only one in sight. Up—before I plant a fist in your belly!" The voice was deeper, but just as raspy as the first, and infinitely more brutal.

Another squeal of pain and fear—the scuffling of feet. Then an answering voice that was whiskey-thick. "Who are you—what do you want?"

"Rode from across the divide to make talk with Crockett. Two men siding me—but plenty more out riding herd on a bunch of wild-eyed mavericks chasing hell-bent all over the valley. In case it means anything to you, I'm called—Sonora Jackson!"

§ § §

SONORA JACKSON! Brad Towler's heart skipped a beat as the man outside named himself. Every impulse urged him to crash the door of the back room open and face Sonora Jackson with guns blazing. The fact that the odds were three to one meant nothing to him.

But back of that wild impulse was cold reason bearing down with a heavy hand. He might kill Jackson—sure. But he wanted much more than that—very much more. He wanted proof that Jackson had gunned his brother and father. Proof, too that the killer had framed Tom Crockett. Proof that would stand up in court.

And he wanted to be sure that Sonora Jackson knew just who was gunning for him—knew all the reasons.

He still stood behind the door, just as silent, just as motionless as before. But now he flexed his right

fingers instinctively, as if he were relaxing them for the feel of his gun-butt.

Perhaps it was the slap—maybe the impact of that dreaded name. For now the drunken man had begun to sober. His voice had lost some of its whiskey-thickness. But it was still thin and high with fear. Towler, there in the darkness of the little back room, caught every word. "What—do you—want with me?"

"Information," Sonora growled. "Want to know what's going on here. We come by the jailhouse. Buck Briggs is not there—nobody's there. Come here. Apache Crockett is gone. The town is deserted. Bunch of crazy riders out in the valley. What's it all about?"

"Crockett—he got word Dave Woodburn an' his outfit—fixin' to string Buck Briggs up. Rode out to the Lazy L three-four—don't know jus' how long ago—aimin' on talkin' Woodburn out of it."

"Not back yet, huh? But those riders out there—"

"Woodburn an' his outfit rode into Loder. Busted into the jailhouse. Briggs wasn't there. Got out through the window. Rode for it. Mob followed out into the valley, huntin' him. Bartender went with 'em. Give me a dollar an' a bottle to watch the place for him."

"Hell of a watchman!" Sonora Jackson said.

Then he spoke to his men. "Grab as much liquor as you can carry. That's to let Crockett know we've been here. If he wants to collect, he's welcome to try."

Then back to the frightened watchman. "What's the shortest way to the Lazy L? Got a hankering to talk with Crockett—if he's still there."

"Down the southwest trail, ten-twelve miles. First spread. In the bend of Solado Creek. Bunch of cottonwoods around it."

Now the clump of booted feet again—the clink of bottles—a burst of raucous laughter as one of the bottles crashed to the floor. Then the door slammed, and the footsteps came from out on the sidewalk. In a few moments that sound faded. Then a mutter of curses from the now almost sober man there in the *One-Eyed Jack*.

BRAD TOWLER waited still a little longer. It was possible that Jackson and his men would linger for a while in Loder. And he didn't want to meet up with them—not right now. After ten minutes that seemed like as many hours, he lifted the latch softly and swung the door open a crack.

From back out of the circle of light from the smoky oil lamp, his gaze swept the room. The slack-jawed man was still there—back in the chair where Brad had first seen him. As Brad looked, the man lifted a bottle with a shaky hand and drank deeply. He leaned over with elaborate caution and set the bottle on the floor beside the chair. Now he leaned back, closed his eyes and let his mouth drop open. In another moment Brad heard a raspy snore.

The young puncher opened the door a little wider—slipped out and stood in the bar-room of the *One-Eyed Jack* again. The man in the chair did not stir. Swiftly, silently Towler made for the front door. In another dozen breaths he was out onto the sidewalk.

He flattened himself against the front of the saloon, his eyes taking in the street, the shapeless shadows that were the buildings along each side, the two or three flickers of dim light from as many windows.

Not a sound reached him—not a movement there in the gloom. He stepped down from the sidewalk and circled the *One-Eyed Jack*. He reached his horse, still standing sedately where he had left it. He swung into the saddle, thinking it was good to have his own horse between his knees, his own gun at his thigh.

For a little while he waited, letting his thoughts crystalize. Gradually what had been a swift impulse back there in the little back room became a thought-out decision now. He tightened the reins, straightened in

his saddle and touched the roan with roweled heels.

He neckreined the animal to circle the buildings along the street, and after a little turned into the southwest trail. That way lay the Lazy L spread. That was the trail Sonora Jackson had taken. Down that way somewhere was Apache Crockett— Maybe still locked in the saddle-house. And Julia Woodburn—

Foolhardy, maybe—but not foolish. It might jeapordize his plan of hooking up with Jackson—might bring him into the open. But as good a man as Apache Crockett was with his six-gun, as cold-nerved, as quick-brained, he could not hope to best Sonora Jackson and two of his men. Not if they found him at the Lazy L.

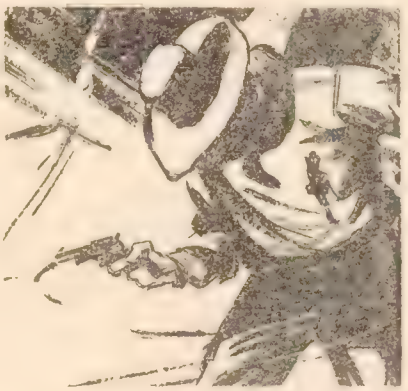
And if Crockett wasn't there, Julia would have to face them alone. For he knew that the girl had headed back to the Lazy L as soon as he was released from the jail. She would not wait around in Loder—would not want to be there if the mob caught him, after all.

With the first ridge between him and the little town, Brad Towler urged his roan to a swift gallop. For a full two miles he held the animal to this pace. Then, silhouetted against the star-studded sky, he saw moving forms. Riders topping the ridge and dropping down on the far side. He counted six, and did not know how many more had gone before he saw them.

Could be Dave Woodburn and his men, heading home. But he discounted that idea quickly. The old rancher would not give up the chase so quickly. He'd ride the valley until dawn—and maybe longer.

There was no doubt in his mind that those shadowy riders were Jackson and his men. Not just the two that were with the killer in the *One-Eyed Jack*, but his entire outfit. And they were heading straight for the Lazy L, just as Jackson had threatened.

Towler followed them for a mile or more, keeping his distance behind them. Once or twice he saw them dimly—several times his alert ears caught their sound—the creak of saddle leather, the click of a hoof on the rocks, the muted mumble of a voice.



Then, where the valley flattened out for a little ways, he edged from the trail. A full three hundred yards to the left of the riders, he urged his horse to a faster pace. He drew abreast of them—then passed them.

HE RODE outside of the trail for two miles further, increasing his lead until the last dim sounds faded. Then he cut back to the trail. For ten minutes or more he let his roan take it easy, while he listened and watched. Then when the animal's breathing came slow and steady, he lifted it into a ground-covering fox-trot.

The men behind were taking it slowly, not expecting to meet anyone on the trail, not in any hurry to ride down on the Lazy L. Towler was glad of that, for he needed a few minutes before they arrived.

As near as he could guess, he had covered ten miles or a little more before he caught the faint flicker of light that could mark only the Lazy L headquarters. He caught himself wondering if he had played it right, after all.

Then his shoulders straightened and his chin lifted. Apache Crockett must still be down there. He had not returned to Loder, and Brad had not passed him on the way. Must be locked in the saddle house where Dave Woodburn had left him. And Crockett had done his best to save

Brad from a revengeful mob. Couldn't leave the dapper little man to face Jackson and his outfit single-handed.

He touched his horse with roweled heels. Gone was the last vestige of indecision. The animal jackknifed down the abrupt slope that dropped away in front. Two hundred yards of tough, treacherous going—then the trail came out on the comparitively flat valley floor. The light was hidden now by the low-branched cottonwoods, but Brad was sure of his directions.

The rangy roan plunged through the last thicket and burst into the clearing that surrounded the Lazy L headquarters. Brad could see the looming shadow of the huge, sprawling house, the smaller shadows of the outbuildings.

A single light gleamed from the front window. Brad pulled his horse from the trail a little ways, swung from the saddle and ground-anchored the animal. With Indian caution he made for the house. He was sure that Woodburn and his men were still out in the valley, but he did not dare take a chance.

After five tense minutes, he rose silently beneath the lighted window. His heart raced, as he peered into the main room of the ranch house. For a moment he thought the room was unoccupied. The light came from an oil lamp on the table. In the circle of its light he could not make out a living thing.

He was conscious of a feeling of disappointment, strangely tinged with relief. Then he stifled an exclamation. For something had moved—something that he made out now as a mass of chestnut hair appearing barely above the back of a huge chair.

THROUGH THE partly opened window he caught a low whimper and the sound of a voice—a voice that set his heart to thumping against his ribs. That sent crinkles racing up and down his spine. He edged closer to catch the words.

"What's the matter, Binky? You're restless. Not thinking of that killer, are you? He's no good, I tell you. You're mistaken, Binky. You're not old enough to know."

Again the low whimper—and now the lilting voice held a note of exasperation. "You'd just as well stop remembering him, Binky. He—he may be dead. He's out of jail—but Uncle Dave might have found him."

Brad thought he detected something strangely like a sob. But the silver voice came again—and now it was steady. "Serve him right, Binky! He—he gunned dad. Just as he's gunned—"

Towler withdrew swiftly, and circled the house. Shouldn't have stopped there, in the first place. He broke into a run toward a little structure some fifty yards back. He knew it was at the saddle house, from its location beside the horse shed.

He reached it, circled it swiftly. Not a sound came from inside. He edged up to the door, and his fingers explored the slab. The heavy bar was in place. Brad felt a surge of relief that the fastening was a bar instead of a padlock. It would have been awkward trying to loosen a lock. Only one way he could have done it, and shooting would be dangerous, with Sonora Jackson getting closer every second.

He lifted the bar softly—swung the door open a crack. He peered in, but the darkness was as black as the inside of a tar barrel. His voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Crockett! Apache Crockett!"

9

FOR A moment there was dead silence inside the dark saddle house. Then a slight rustling sound reached Brad's ears. Now a voice that bit like the blade of a sharp knife.

"Damn you, I'd ought to drill you,

Dave Woodburn! And if you've—"

In spite of the deadly anger in that voice, Brad Towler drew a breath of relief. For he recognized it as Crockett's. He opened the door a little wider. "It's Brad Towler—not Woodburn. Heard he'd locked you in here. Hoped you'd be out by now, but was afraid to chance it." He took a step inside.

Footsteps sounded on the slab floor. Brad sensed rather than saw the slim figure glide toward him. He felt a hand touch his arm. "Towler! Then Dave Woodburn didn't—" "Julia helped me break jail, just ahead of the lynch mob. But that's another story."

"What are you doing here? You'd ought to be half way to Jackson's place by now. I didn't need your help. Old Dave Woodburn would let me out when—"

"No time to wait for Woodburn. Jackson and his outfit are heading this way—no more than ten-fifteen minutes behind."

In swift words, Brad Towler told what had happened in Loder. He felt Apache Crockett's fingers tighten on his arm as he talked. And when he had finished, Crockett's voice was strangely lower, softer. "Thanks, Towler. You served me better than I did you. Woodburn took my guns when he locked me up. Could have gunned him, if I'd been a mind to. But I thought I could get out in time. Without guns, I wouldn't have much chance against Sonora Jackson."

Towler was already backing out of the saddle house. Apache Crockett followed closely. Both men paused a second—listened intently. And both were listening for the same thing—the pound of hoofs on the down trail.

As yet there was no sound to mark Jackson's coming. But Brad knew that the time was perilously short. He spoke with desperate urgency. "Julia is in the house—alone. Dave Woodburn and his men are still hunting me out in the valley. We'll have to get her out before—"

"Don't worry about that, Towler," Crockett said evenly. "She'll be in the saddle, and headed for—

His words broke off short, for a strange sound came to them from up toward the house. A muffled sound that they could not make out at first. Then the door opened, splashing the narrow porch with orange light from the oil lamp.

A slim form stood silhouetted in the doorway. Brad Towler's heart skipped a beat. For there was no mistaking that halo of chestnut hair, tinged with gold from the light. No mistaking that slender, shapely figure.

But now they knew the sound they had heard—the furious barking of a little dog. And at almost the same instant a tiny form hurtled past Julia Woodburn, and dashed into the darkness straight toward the two men.

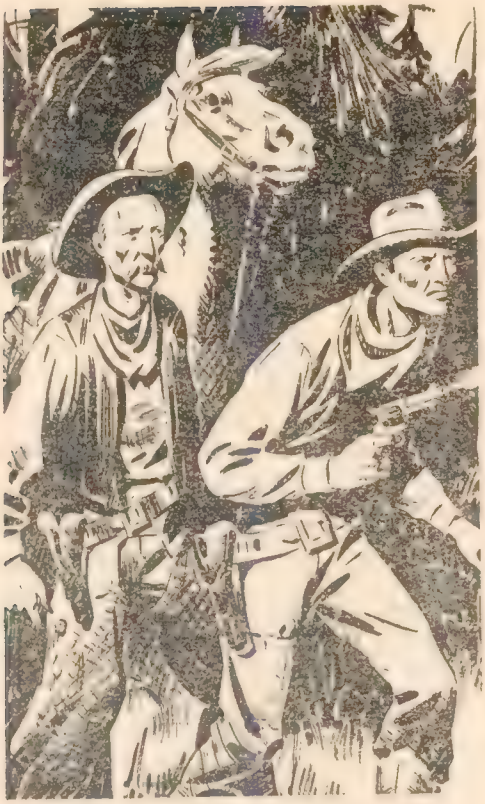
APACHE CROCKETT took a backward step. But Towler's low voice stopped him. "It's Bowie—Julia's little dog—the one that the bob-cat clawed. He's heard something that he don't like. He'll not—"

The little dog reached Brad Towler—skidded to a stop—whirled and stood between Brad's widespread legs, his nose into the darkness. The barking had changed now to a deep-throated growl. Stooping, his hand on the little dog's neck, Brad could feel the hair standing on end.

Then the two men heard what had alarmed the little dog. The muffled beat of hoofs on the northeast trail. Both knew what it meant. Both knew the showdown was closer than they had thought.

"Sonora Jackson!" Brad breathed. "And Bobcat Drake is with him! The dog scents him—and hates the scent."

Crockett clutched Brad's arm. "You fork your horse and head west, Towler! If Jackson finds you here, the whole deal will blow up in our faces. You're supposed to be Buck Briggs—remember? Supposed to be riding to join up with him. I'll take



care of the girl." Then his voice became as hard as steel. "Take care of Jackson, too—if he don't turn tail and run like a yellow-bellied coyote!"

He loosed his hold on Towler's arm, whirled and raced toward the house. Brad watched his slim figure against the light from the door. He saw him enter the house, as Julia Woodburn drew back—watched as the door slammed shut.

He moved swiftly now. He circled the house on the run, and reached his roan. He swung into the saddle, turned the animal and touched it with roweled heels. Man and horse faded into the darkness.

But he did not ride hell-bent into the west, as Crockett had advised; he had no intention of leaving the dapper little gunslinger to face Jackson and his outfit alone. Nor had he any intention of running out until he knew that Julia was heading for safety.

He pulled his horse to a stop at the edge of the cottonwood grove that rimmed the ranchyard. He swung the animal back to face the house—leaned far over his saddlehorn in his intentness. In the star-sprinkled night there was only light enough to distinguish deeper shadows—maybe make out a moving shadow, if it was big enough.

Brad Towler's eyes, somewhat accustomed to the dark, fixed alternately upon the spot where the trail entered the cottonwood grove across the clearing and the house itself. He was equally intent upon seeing Sonora Jackson when he entered the clearing and Julia when she left.

But he did not notice the little form that had followed him. Did not know it was close, until a rumbling growl came from right beneath him. Just for an instant the sound startled him. His hand streaked instinctively for his holster. But it came away just as quickly.

He swung down from his saddle, stooped and gathered the little dog in his arms. "Bowie, you damned little fool! You nigh scared the daylights out of me. You've got a hell of a big growl for a pup of your size!"

But there was no amusement in his voice. For he knew what that growl meant—knew that the scent of Bobcat Drake—and Sonora Jackson—was becoming plainer to the tiny animal.

STILL STANDING beside his horse, his eyes aching with the intensity of his stare, he tried to pierce the velvet gloom. The light from the uncurtained window still painted an orange slash on the ground outside. But its radiance reached only a few feet before it was swallowed up by the darkness.

Abruptly he put the little dog back on the ground. "Keep your mouth shut, Bowie! I know you hate Bobcat Drake—that you don't like Jackson! But don't tell them about it too soon!"

Then he was back in the saddle. He edged his horse a little to the left, until he could see the porch of the house as well as the window. He knew the dog was following, for he could still hear the muffled growl.

He was beginning to feel a des-

perate uneasiness now. Apache Crockett had promised to see that Julia got away ahead of the lobo pack. He hoped that the dapper saloon-keeper's mind would follow the same track of his own—hoped that Julia Woodburn would listen to Crockett, and obey him.

For her only hope of safety lay in flight—swift and immediate flight. Brad had expected to see her making for the horse barn. But for a full minute there was no sound or movement. Towler's nerves were beginning to tense. If she waited much longer, it would be too late. Certainly Apache Crockett knew that—certainly he would—

Then suddenly a shadow detached itself from the dark corner of the house—flitted across his line of vision, silhouetted for a split second against the somewhat lighter gray of the sky—then disappeared.

It all came so fast, so silently that he had only time to half turn in his saddle before the moving shadow merged with the velvet blackness. Even then he was not sure that his eyes had not tricked him.

It must have been Julia, he told himself. She had left the house by the back door instead of the front. That was the smart thing to do. Dangerous to cross the slash of light from the window. But still he was not quite sure.

He tightened his reins, spoke softly to his roan. The trail-wise animal moved almost silently toward the horse shed. Now it loomed squat and shapeless in front of his eyes. He pulled to a stop, his ears alert.

There was no sound from inside the building except the natural sounds of animals stabled for the night. He swung down, and found the little dog still beside him. But now there was no growl coming from its throat.

Towler stepped softly, as he moved toward the door of the shed. Six feet from it, he realized that it was open. He inched ahead again, until he stood squarely in the opening. At first he could see nothing—hear nothing.

Then he caught a softly-spoken word. Now the muffled thump of a saddle being tossed over a horse's back. The voice was so low that he could not be sure. But he thought that even then he caught a hint of the musical lilt that could come from no other lips than Julia Woodburn's.

He waited there just a second, leaning forward, eyes and ears alert. But the voice did not come again. And now he backed away softly, turned and moved toward his own horse. As he swung into the saddle, another sound, this time unmistakable, reached him.

The thud of hoofs, the creak of saddle leather, the snort of a winded horse, muttered curses. Then a half dozen shadowy figures, barely visible against the background of trees. As they came into the clearing, they scattered to surround the house.

10

BRAD TOWLER drew a sharp breath, and little shivers chased themselves up and down his back. Time had run out. A scant minute ago the way had been clear, but now Sonora Jackson and his killers had arrived. The way was blocked. His hand moved swiftly, surely to his holster.

But now a horse emerged from the door of the horse shed. Brad could barely make out the slender figure on the ground beside it. Then his eyes swung back to the riders who had entered the ranch yard.

Half of them had circled to the left, but he could make out at least three that were heading warily in his direction. He knew that their attention would be held by the house—by the lighted window. But he knew just as surely that any untoward sound would bring them around instantly.

He could not be sure that Julia Woodburn realized the Jackson outfit was so close—was afraid that she would ride out into the ranch yard

too openly, too swiftly. Towler touched his horse with roweled heels, and moved closer to the horse shed.

Julia must have seen the shadowy rider loom up just as she swung into her saddle. For Brad caught the startled exclamation that came from her lips—thought he saw her hand dart from the holster at her side.

His voice, scarcely louder than a whisper, apparently reached her. For she sat her saddle, as motionless and silent as a figure carved from granite. Brad edged his horse closer. At her side, he leaned from his saddle toward her. His eyes tried to make out her face.

It was only a little lighter splotch in the darkness. But he did catch the glint of starlight from the barrel of the six-gun that seemed to be trained squarely upon him.

Towler's whisper came again. "Steady, Miss Julia! Steady—and quiet! Sonora Jackson's outfit is in the clearing. They've surrounded the house. No telling when they'll take a notion to head this way. You'd best circle the barn, and make for the valley. Take it slow and easy."

"You're—you're Buck Briggs!" Julia Woodburn's voice was no louder than Brad's, but even a whisper could not hide the scorn and hatred in it.

"No time to argue that point!" Now Brad Towler's whisper held a note of great urgency. "Sonora Jackson—"

"Between the two of you, I'd choose Sonora Jackson!" Julia's voice raised ever so little.

"You needn't choose either! All I'm saying is that you'd better get to moving! You can't tell what Jackson might have in mind. He's looking for Apache Crockett, but if he finds you here—"

The slender girl edged her horse around Towler's now. Edged wide in a plain attempt to avoid him as far as possible. "I'm riding into the valley—because Apache Crockett advised it. I'd hoped I'd never see you again. I don't know why you came here—unless it was to kill my uncle as you did my father—to shoot him in the back when you feared to face him. But if you do meet him, he'll gun you down like the coyote you are!"

Brad Towler choked down the exasperation that was almost anger. After all, she could not know—could not realize. His voice, even as low as he kept it, held a rasping note. "You and your uncle have nothing to fear from me! In spite of all you think, I did not kill your father—and I have no intention of gunning Dave!"

Still moving away, Julia's whisper reached him clearly. "You lie! I know—and my uncle knows! You're a killer—a murderer! I'm almost sorry now that I helped—"

Brad Towler shot a swift glance toward the house. The three riders on his side had moved past, and were just a little further away. But no telling when they would decide to turn.

"You're as stubborn as a mule, Julia Woodburn, but someday I'll prove you wrong. Right now, all I'm interested in is to see you moving! Try to find Dave out in the valley. He'll be hunting me." There was a little bitterness in Brad's tone. "Try to make him see that it is more important for him to ride here with his men as fast as their horses can carry them. I'll cover your leaving."

NOW THE shapeless shadow of horse and slim rider moved still farther away—circled the horse barn, and disappeared in the darkness. Towler could hear the muffled beat of the animal's hoofs, and he tensed. For the sound might carry to Jackson's men—might warn them that someone was escaping.

For a full minute he sat there, his hand hovering over the butt of his six-gun. He was beginning to hope that Julia had gotten away safely after all—that the whole attention of Sonora Jackson's outfit was centered on the house. He was just getting ready to head his own horse back to the edge of the clearing, when it happened.

The click of a hoof on a rock out beyond the horse barn was not loud in itself. But apparently the stone had been dislodged, for its clatter

as it rolled down a slope came all too loud and clear. And following closely, the pound of hoofs as a horse was urged into a swift gallop.

Brad drew a sharp breath. His nerves and muscles tightened. For he knew what had happened; Julia's horse had dislodged the rock. That might have passed unnoticed, but the sound had startled her; she had been sure that it carried plainly to the raiders. And she lifted her horse into racing speed in a panic to get clear of pursuit she was certain would come quickly.

"She—shouldn't have—done that!" Towler breathed. "She should have—taken it easy! But now she's—"

In swift confirmation of his fears, he heard the raspy voice from up toward the house. "He's ridin' for it, boss! Apache Crockett's headin'—"

Then Jackson's answering yell from beyond the house. "It ain't Crockett! He's inside! Somebody else! Two of you head him off!"

Leaning forward in his saddle, eyes narrowed with the strain of trying to make out the killers in the darkness, Brad Towler waited only another moment. Then he caught the movement—could place the men who were turning to pursue Julia Woodburn.

He tightened his reins now, spoke softly to the rangy roan. As silent as a drifting shadow, horse and rider moved around the barn and in the direction of the fading hoofbeats that marked the girl's flight. The pair of raiders were following—but not at a swift pace yet.

Out of the clutter of buildings and corrals, into and through the narrow grove of cottonwoods. Brad pulled his horse to a stop just for an instant. Those hoofbeats were dying fast, but they still came plainly enough. And now he could catch the sounds of the two men well behind him.

He touched his roan with spurred heels, lifting it into a swift fox trot. The trail-wise animal avoided the rocky going instinctively, and the sound of its hoofbeats did not come loudly—yet. But the distance between Brad and his pursuers lengthened fast.

Another hundred yards—then he increased his speed. There was no chance now that the killers behind him could miss the clatter. He headed straight after the girl for still another hundred yards. Then he angled to the left, and lifted the roan to a still faster pace.

Now he turned in his saddle and peered back into the darkness. A smile without a trace of humor crossed his lips. For he heard one of the riders call to the other. The words came clearly through the thin, high air.

"There he goes! Off to the left! Circle an' head him!"

Brad Towler pulled his horse to a stop for an instant. He sat there tensely, ears and eyes alert. Then he caught the clatter of hoofs from behind—a good two hundred yards behind. He drew a long breath of relief. Julia had made good her escape. He had drawn the pursuers onto his own trail.

Now he gave the rangy roan its head. In tough going—in the darkness or on a rough trail, there was no horse on the range that could keep up with the roan. Brad headed straight into the northwest for a full mile before he slowed down. And then only long enough to be sure that the two killers were still on his trail.

Now he circled still more to the left. In another mile he had almost reversed his direction, and was making for the Lazy L, coming toward it from almost due west. He figured that the men behind him were paying no attention to their directions—that they were intent only on keeping the sound of hoofs in their ears

—in shortening the distance between them and the rider ahead.

He slowed his roan almost imperceptibly now. Gradually the pound of hoofs became louder. The two were no more than a hundred yards behind him when he topped a low ridge and looked down into the shadowy bowl of the little valley and the grove of cottonwoods that sheltered the Lazy L.

And now, for the first time, he heard the dull report of six-guns, caught the flashes of orange flame from the slow-burning black powder. The light still flickered in the main room of the Lazy L house, and an occasional answering report came from the window.

APACHE CROCKETT was still inside the house—still keeping Sonora Jackson and his outfit at bay. A new respect for the dapper little man with the cold eyes and steady hand came to Brad Towler—a new proof that courage did not depend upon size.

For no more than a dozen seconds Brad held to the ridge. Just long enough to locate the killers by the flashes of their guns. Then he turned his roan and urged it down the abrupt slope into the deeper shadows that surrounded the Lazy L house.

Angling to the left, he circled the structure, and approached it from the rear. Apparently the two who pursued him had given their attention to the battle down below, for he could not make them out in the darkness—could not hear them above the sounds from in front of the house.

And apparently the rest of the outfit was concentrating on that side, too. For he made the full hundred yards across the clearing without meeting up with anyone.

Just back of the squat outbuilding that almost shouldered the lean-to kitchen, he swung from his saddle and dropped the reins to the ground in front of his roan. Swiftly he crossed the short open stretch, and flattened himself against the kitchen wall.

He stood there silent and motionless for a tense minute. Still no movement or sound near him. He edged slowly to the slab door. His hand found the latchstring. He lifted it slowly, cautiously. The door swung open soundlessly.

Brad slipped through the narrow opening, closing the door behind him. Blackness, as deep and profound as death, enclosed him. For just a second he leaned a little forward, his ears sharpened for any sound, his eyes searching for any pinpoint of light.

The muffled sound of six-gun reports came from outside. Occasionally an answering shot came more clearly from the main room at the front of the house. But the dark room in which he stood seemed entirely deserted.

Right hand hovering over the butt of his gun, left hand stretched out in front of him, fingers widespread to warn him of any obstruction, he moved forward. The imminence of danger and sudden death sharpened his every sense to its highest pitch.

Twice he sidestepped, as his fingers found some obstacle—a chair, a table, the big kitchen stove. Then he reached the wall. He inched along it until he found the door that led into the front part of the house.

Again he listened with grim intentness, ear against the slab. Now he could catch the shuffling of feet from still further front—even the click of a gun as it was broken to refill the cylinder. Once a low oath followed the crash of a bullet into the wall.

Brad smiled mirthlessly. At least Crockett was excited enough, angry enough to curse the marauders. Now he pushed the door open slowly, silently. It swung away from him. A faint light caught his eyes—a streak that came from beneath still another door across the room.

He moved toward it avoiding by the faint light the long table and the dozen or more chairs that cluttered the room. He crossed quickly, and stood at the last door between him and Crockett. His hand went out to the latch, but he held it back.

It wouldn't be good sense to open

the door and burst in on the gun-swift beyond it. Crockett would be thoroughly justified in shooting first and looking afterwards.

He rapped sharply on the slab door—then listened with his ear against it. He caught the startled exclamation from beyond. Heard the cautious slither of feet—the click of a cocked hammer. Then Apache Crockett's voice, tense but even. "Whoever you are in there—come out with your hands high. Come out, before I send a bullet chasing you!"

11

BRAD DREW his hand away from his holster. A thin-lipped, humorless smile flicked his mouth, as he lifted his right hand shoulder high. Then he pushed the door open a crack—held it with his booted foot, as the other hand went up. "Hold your stinger, Crockett! My hands are gun-free! I'm coming out, reaching for the ceiling!"

He opened the door a little wider—slipped through. The light from the smoky oil lamp seemed as bright as daylight in contrast with the velvet darkness from which he had come. He blinked for an instant to accustom his eyes to the change.

"Brad Towler, you damned idiot!" Apache Crockett exploded. "Why in hell did you come back here? I told you to head for Sonora Jackson's hideout. I can handle—"

A crooked grin crossed Towler's face. "You told me to head west—but west is a pretty wide place. Might have ended up in California. I need better directions than that. Anyhow, I had to see Julia safe on her trail. By the time I sidetracked the pair who were following, I ended up right back here. Figured I might as well stop and pass the time of day."

In spite of himself, Apache answered Brad's grin. Somehow that smile seemed to change the cold-eyed man's whole personality—to make him a human being. His voice, too was softer, with less rasp and bite. "I've heard worse yarns in my time. But what I said still goes. I can hold off Jackson until Dave Woodburn gets tired hunting for you—or until the girl finds him. You've had your visit—passed the time of day. Now get going!"

Brad shook his head. "Near a dozen of them out there. Soon as they're sure there's just you in here, they'll come at you from all sides. You're good with your guns, all right—but you've got only two hands and two eyes. I'm sticking until—"

Brad broke his words off short. For now a new sound came from outside—a subtle sound that he could not quite place. At first he was sure that it came from the Jackson outfit—figured they were up to some new trick.

Then that sound grew in intensity, became plainer, more distinct. A chorus of hoarse yells, a fusillade of shots. A high-pitched scream and a rasping curse. Apache Crockett glided swiftly to the window—thrust his head just high enough to peer over the ledge. Then, still crouching, he turned back to Brad.

"Someone riding into the clearing, guns talking plenty loud. Looks like six-eight of them. Likely Dave Woodburn. Time for you to make tracks. Remember—you're Buck Briggs, the man who killed Woodburn's brother. He wouldn't take right kindly to finding you here."

"Yeah, I'm remembering. But the trail to Sonora Jackson's place! You haven't—"

"It's in Deaf Jones Canyon—so I've heard. Head southwest. Stay off the trail. The going's tough, but you're safer that way. Look for a camelback ridge. You'll have to hit the trail there, for there's no other way over it. You can't miss the canyon then. It's just at the foot of the slope on the other side. From there, you're on your own."

THE DIRECTIONS were sketchy, especially when they would have to be followed in the darkness of night. But Brad Towler

had full confidence in his own trail-sense—and in that of his rangy roan. He'd find the canyon, right enough.

The uproar outside the Lazy L house increased in intensity with every passing second—yells, gunshots, the pound of hoofs. Brad would have liked nothing better than to stay and swap lead with Sonora Jackson. But he knew the bitterness in old Dave's heart against Buck Briggs—knew that his life would be worth nothing if the old rancher had a chance to drag down on him.

He turned and spoke swiftly to Apache Crockett. "The girl—Julia—she hates me like poison. Likely she told old Dave Woodburn that I'm here. But if there's anything you can say to—"

A humorless smile played with Apache Crockett's thin lips. "Girls are all right—in their place, and at the right time. But you've got more important business. Get to going!"

Towler backed to the door and slipped through into the darkness of the back rooms. Then he was outside in the star-sprinkled night. He raced for the little building that sheltered his horse.

And as he ran, he heard a yell—knew that it was Woodburn's voice. "They're on the run! Give 'em hell!"

Brad reached his roan and swung aboard. But he did not give the animal the rowels for a moment. He leaned from his saddle. His eyes strained to pierce the darkness—his ears were attuned to catch any near sound. But all the sounds—the shots and the yells—came from in front of the house.

And now he could tell by the very tone that Dave Woodburn's exultant shout had been right. Jackson and his outfit were taking a beating that they could not stand up under. Reluctantly the young puncher touched his horse with spurred heels, and headed unseen and unheard into the southwest.

Back there behind Brad Towler—back in the Lazy L clearing—the fight raged for a scant ten minutes more. Bullets whistled through the leaves and brush. They sang past the ears of Sonora Jackson and his outfit. Orange flashes split the darkness. Lead spatted dully into trees and rocks.

One of Jackson's men stifled a scream, as a bullet drilled his forearm. Another slumped in his saddle, a slug through his shoulder. And Jackson caught the same exultant yell that Brad had heard.

And the burly outlaw knew that the old rancher was right—knew that all the advantage was with Dave Woodburn. He was fighting on ground he knew well—fighting in his own front yard. Fighting out of the cover of darkness, from the protection of brush and trees.

"Back, men! Back to the trail!" Jackson's voice carried above the bellow of six-guns.

As the milling riders whirled their horses, Sonora Jackson swung into the lead. He circled the house, his men following at his heels. They sent bullets crashing through the windows and walls, whistling through the underbrush and trees in one last wild crescendo.

As they faded from the clearing, Sonora Jackson's voice raised in a booming bellow that carried well to Woodburn and his men. "We'll be back, Woodburn! We'll be back—and next time there'll be nothing left of the Lazy L!"

DAVE WOODBURN and his grim riders surged into the clearing now. But they were too late. The maurauders were gone. The pound of their horses' hoofs was dying in the distance.

The Lazy L riders crowded close to their boss. One or two were

nicked by bullets, another one or two were scratched and bruised by clawing branches. But none was so seriously hurt that the excitement of the fight lost its tang. They moved toward the house.

The door swung open, and a slim form stood in the oblong of orange light. Then Apache Crockett stepped out onto the narrow slab porch. Woodburn was already prodding toward him.

"You all right, Crockett? Julia told me you got out of the saddle house just in time. Said you helped her get away right ahead of the raid. She met us half way to Loder, heading toward home. Afraid we'd be too late."

Apache smiled grimly. "Not a minute too early, Woodburn. If you hadn't locked me up—if you hadn't been dead set on stringing up Buck Briggs—"

"He busted out of jail ahead of us," Woodburn growled. "We hunted him from one end of the valley to the other. Didn't find hide nor hair—"

He stopped his words short. His brows drew down in a frown. His hand went instinctively toward his holster. "Bobcat Drake said Briggs aimed to join up with Sonora Jackson. I wonder if—"

Dave Woodburn whirled to his men. "He's making for Jackson's place! I'd bet my best saddle on it! We're taking the trail to Deaf Jones Canyon!"

He prodded his horse through the milling crowd of riders. For a moment they sat their saddles, open-mouthed. Then their yells of approval welled up. With one accord they whirled their horses and followed the old rancher.

For just a moment Apache Crockett stood silent and motionless on the porch of the Lazy L ranch house. Then half-whispered words came from his lips. "Damn fool! Woodburn hasn't a chance against Jackson, up there in the hills!" Then his face softened just a little. "The girl—she didn't say anything to old Dave about Brad Towler—didn't let on—"

He shook his head unbelievingly. Then he stepped down and made for the horse shed. Inside, his own mount was saddled and ready. He'd fork the animal and head back for Loder. Seen plenty of Sonora Jackson—and Woodburn, too—for a spell.

12

OUT IN the darkness, Sonora Jackson and his outfit were heading for the high country. For a mile or more they rode fast. But, with a little distance between them and the Lazy L, they slowed down. The outlaw leader did not credit Dave Woodburn with nerve enough to follow him into the hills.

Now he called Bobcat Drake to his side. "You heard Buck Briggs say he was planning to join up with us—heard him brag he was heading for Deaf Jones Canyon when he broke jail?"

The big ruffian did not answer for a moment, and when he did speak, he stumbled over his words. "I—I didn't exactly—hear him say it—not with my own ears. Him and me had a little run-in. Apache Crockett sided him. Wasn't no time for me to stick around Loder. But Crockett's swamper brought me word down to the livery stable. That's when I headed back for the canyon."

"You were a long time getting there. Didn't beat Curly Wacker by more than a half hour or so—and he didn't start for a long time after you. You sure you didn't—"

"Didn't stop nowhere!" Drake lied. "Made it as fast as I could. My horse wasn't so fresh—and that damned bobcat—"

"Some of these days I'm going to blow that yellow-eyed killer plumb to hell," Jackson grunted. "I don't like—"

It was the sound of hoofs on the

trail behind that broke off the outlaw leader's words. Many sets of hoofs—horses coming at top speed. It was faint now, but even as the Jackson outfit pulled to a dead stop—as Sonora Jackson listened intently—it grew perceptibly.

"By God, it's the Woodburn outfit!" Jackson growled deep in his throat. "That little scrap back there at the Lazy L gave the old man a mighty high opinion of himself! Figures he's got us shaded anywhere—any time!"

Bobcat Drake grinned in the darkness. "We'll stop here, huh? Have it out with him for keeps? I'd like nothin' better than to get that ol' pelican over my sights!"

Jackson hesitated for a moment. It was plain that every urge was for a showdown. He still smarted from the necessity of running from the old rancher. But his native cunning prevailed. But at last he turned and gave his orders. "We're riding for the canyon—riding fast! This time we'll meet Dave Woodburn on our own range. Let him follow us. We know the trail better—know all the short-cuts—know all the cover. We'll beat him there. Have plenty of time to get set. Good chance for a final showdown."

The outlaws grumbled a little, but they obeyed—knew better than to refuse. With Sonora Jackson riding in the lead and Bobcat Drake bringing up the rear, they thundered up the twisting foothill trail.

WITHIN half an hour, the pound of hoofs behind had died out completely. The riders halted for a few minutes to give their animals a breathing spell. And now Jackson called Bobcat Drake to his side again. It was plain that the mysterious Briggs was still on his mind. "You saw this Buck Briggs—you had a mixup with him. Is he the curly wolf he pretends to be?"

"He had the drop on me, or I'd have—"

"You're not answering the question I asked you," Jackson growled. "Is he a real gunslick? Good enough for us? And is he sore enough at Apache Crockett to—"

"He's plenty handy with his six-gun," Drake agreed a little reluctantly. "And if he ain't sore at Crockett he'd ought to be; Crockett had him jailed for the reward."

Sonora Jackson nodded in the darkness. "We'll take him on—provided he gets through—and if he agrees to follow my orders. We can use another good gun-slinger. One who don't like Apache Crockett."

"You mean you're aimin' to—"

"The showdown with Crockett's not far off," Sonora Jackson said.

"Sounds g o o d," Bobcat Drake agreed, but there was little enthusiasm in his voice.

With the first faint sounds that warned the outlaw outfit that Dave Woodburn and his riders were nearing again, they got under way once more. And this time they did not pause until they were at the very mouth of Deaf Jones Canyon. Here they halted and gathered around their leader.

"Here's the place we'll stop them," Jackson said. "Canyon's not more than two hundred yards wide. They'll have to come bunched. Back up a ways, they might get past us."

At his orders, a half dozen killers swung from their horses and disappeared like silent shadows into the brush that rimmed the trail. Sonora Jackson turned to the rest. "You, Bobcat Drake and Hamer—head up the canyon, and hole up beside the big boulder. If anyone gets by, pick them off—unless it's someone you know."

Then to another of the grim riders: "You, Ackerman—lead your horses off into the brush out of sight. And stay put until we warm old Woodburn's breeches."

Jackson and the remaining three or four of the outfit, swung down from their own mounts and ground-tied them just off the trail. Then they stole back, and crouched under the cover of low boulders and brush beside the narrow path.

The outlaw leader snaked his six-gun from its holster. His men followed suit. But at almost that instant the shadowy form of a horse and rider burst from the darkness, sky-

lined for just a second—then plunged toward them.

Sonora Jackson's right six-gun swung up. His trigger finger whitened, as he squeezed. But suddenly it relaxed. His husky whisper was directed at his men. "Hold your fire! Only one rider—and Drake'll take care of him. Woodburn and his men are coming fast. We'll wait for them!"

The single rider came abreast—hurtled past. The bushwhackers in the brush watched him, trigger-fingers itching. But they crouched silently—waiting.

THE FIRST of the Lazy L outfit loomed against the star-sprinkled sky for a moment, vague and shapeless moving shadows. A half-dozen six-guns swung up, there in the brush. "Another twenty yards—then let them have it!" Sonora Jackson ordered.

A scant five seconds—then guns bellowed savagely. Bullets whispered through leaves and brush. They sang past the ears of Dave Woodburn and his men. Orange flashes split the darkness. Lead spatted dully into trees and rocks.

One Lazy L rider swayed in his saddle, dropped his reins and clutched the saddle-horn as a bullet tore through his shoulder. A bullet tugged at Woodburn's hat crown. He could feel its searing heat across his scalp. A third man howled and cursed as hot lead drilled his calf.

Dave Woodburn, a little dazed but otherwise unhurt by the bullet, pulled to a sliding stop. His surging riders almost overran him. An ambush was something a little more than he had bargained for. A fair fight in the open, and Woodburn would have asked no odds. But this was sure death. "Back, men! Back to the bend!" he ordered sharply.

As the milling riders whirled their horses, Sonora Jackson laughed mirthlessly. "Reckon we've taught that old curly wolf a lesson he'll not forget soon! Same medicine we'll give anyone who takes a notion to buck us!"

Now he rose from his cover. The gradually fading sound of hoofs on the trail told all too plainly that Dave Woodburn and his men were in full flight.

"Now we've finished with Woodburn," he said, "I'm right anxious to see the rider who passed us. Bobcat Drake and Hamer ought to have him stopped—likely headed for the cabin by now."

The bushwhackers, grimly pleased at having turned the tables on Woodburn, swung onto their horses. Silently they circled left to hit the shorter trail up the canyon to the hideout.

And because of that circle, they missed something that would have both pleased and angered them—something that would have brought grins of coarse enjoyment to their hard-bitten faces.

13

BOBCAT Drake and squat Hamer were hidden in the brush beside the big boulder, two hundred yards up the main trail, a good two minutes before the single rider thundered down upon them.

Brad Towler had pulled into the trail some four miles back, and not more than a half mile ahead of Woodburn and his men. He heard them plainly, but he supposed

that it was Sonora Jackson and his outfit, wondering a little that he had gotten ahead of them.

From there he rode only fast enough to keep a little way ahead of them. And he had charged past the spot where the killer outfit were hidden without knowing of the deadly ambush—without realizing how close he had come to stopping a bullet.

But he pulled to a sliding stop beside a huge boulder, as the first rattle of gunfire from behind reached him. He leaned low, turning in his saddle. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness. But all he could see was the orange flashes from six-gun muzzles.

In that instant, Bobcat Drake recognized the man silhouetted against the starlit sky—knew him by the breadth of his shoulders, the peak-crowned hat—and more than anything else by the smoothness and grace of his movements.

Recognized him as the gun-swift who had faced him down, back in Loder—the man who might oust him from his place as second in command of the Jackson outfit. A look of deadly hatred swept his broad face in the darkness.

He straightened silently, a bare two yards from the startled rider. His six-gun came up and covered Towler's broad chest. The star light glinted from its barrel in deadly threat. "Lift 'em high, Briggs!" he barked. "This time you ain't got Apache Crockett to side you!"

Brad jerked erect, swung around in his saddle. He could see the shadowy figures of Drake and Hamer, one on each side of him. He knew the voice that rasped in his ears. Slowly his hands went up. "I can't see your face," he said softly. "But I know you by the stink. You're the big, brave hombre who turns a bobcat loose on a helpless little dog. Bobcat Drake, huh?"

"You called it right," Drake growled. "Back in Loder, Apache Crockett saved your hide. But you're in the hills now—and that green-eyed gunslick ain't beside you!"

"You figure you can cut me down before I can drag my gun, huh?" Towler's voice was still soft and even. But his nerves and muscles tensed.

Bobcat Drake laughed shortly, harshly. "Try for your gun, if you feel lucky!" He edged nearer Towler, and his gun-muzzle prodded the rider in the ribs.

Brad could see the man's eyes gleaming like a cat's in the darkness. His own narrowed. His fingers crooked to dark for his holster. His muscles tightened for swift action. But he held his impulse in stern check.

"You're hunting in pairs," he said calmly. "I'd take a chance on either one of you alone. But I might have known that Bobcat Drake would be scared to prowl alone in the dark."

"Scared, huh?" Bobcat Drake's voice trembled with surging anger. "Scared because you're Buck Briggs? Scared because you claim to be the champion gun-slick of the high country? For my money, you're a bragging, yellow-livered—" His voice spluttered to a stop.

Then he spoke again, his voice a little higher as he called to his partner. "You, Hamer! Come around here!"

The squat ruffian moved past the roan's head, and stopped at Drake's side. Bobcat Drake prodded Brad again with his gun-muzzle. "Unbuckle his gun-belt, Hamer!" he ordered. "I aim to pistol-whip him, like I promised back in Loder!"

Hamer grinned, teeth gleaming in the starlight, as he reached up and loosed Brad's belt. The belt and filled holster thudded to the ground. Drake took a single backward step. "Now climb down, Buck Briggs, and take what's been coming to you for quite a spell!"

BRAD TOWLER swung one leg over the saddle-horn. He dropped lightly to the ground, his knees flexing until he was in a squatting position, his fingers on the ground in front of him. Then his long legs snapped straight, like the uncoiling of a tightly wound spring.

He whirled sideways, as he lunged straight for Bobcat Drake. The burly killer's gun bellowed suddenly. The

bullet whispered within an inch of Towler's ear. But now the puncher's lowered head caught the ruffian squarely in the middle.

A gusty grunt came from Drake's lips, as he doubled forward. His gun fell to the ground as his hands went in an instinctive gesture toward his battered mid-section. Hamer's weapon swept up, but he did not dare shoot for fear of drilling his partner.

Brad Towler straightened suddenly. The top of his head crashed into Drake's chin. The big outlaw teetered on his toes for a second—then slumped in a sudden heap.

But even as Drake fell, Brad's hand streaked out and snatched the man's second gun from its holster. He whirled, bringing the gun up to hip-level. A startled curse burst from Hamer's lips.

He backed away, as his own gun swung toward Brad Towler. He squeezed the trigger, and the gun belched orange flame. The bullet came close—so close that Brad could feel its hot breath on his cheek.

Then the six-gun in Brad's hand swung high—crashed down on Hamer's thick skull. The man dropped like an axed steer. He twitched once or twice—then lay still. Brad whirled to Bobcat Drake, now struggling to his feet. "Up with them, Drake! High!"

The words barely reached Bobcat Drake's dazed brain. But he obeyed mechanically. A smile devoid of humor flicked Brad's lips. Still covering the big outlaw, he listened intently for a moment. During the tense seconds he had forgotten that gunfire behind. And now it had died out.

He spoke again, his voice even but steel-threaded. "I'd ought to drill you plumb center, Drake—drill you, and leave your stinking carcass for the coyotes. You've got it coming to you. Tried to get me plenty—when you knew I was aiming to join up with Sonora Jackson."

"Jackson told me—to stop anyone who—"

"Yeah—maybe he did," Brad continued inexorably. "But he didn't aim for you to carry word to Dave Woodburn that I was locked in the Loder jail—didn't figure you'd try to get me strung high. He'd be right put out about that."

"But I didn't—it was the girl, Julia—she knew—she brought the word to old Dave!" Bobcat Drake's voice was high and thin now.

It came to Brad Towler suddenly that Bobcat Drake was deadly afraid of Jackson—fearful of the anger that would blast him when he heard what Drake had done. "You know you lie," Brad said softly. "And when I tell Sonora Jackson why I drilled you, he'll not blame me—any. He must be needing my gun, or he wouldn't have ridden to Loder to help me break jail."

"But he didn't—you were already out when—"

Brad was beginning to enjoy the terror that was so plain in Drake's voice. "No thanks to you, Drake! You tried your best to see me dancing on air. And you lied to Sonora about it—just as you lied to me."

It was a shot in the dark, but apparently it struck home. For Bobcat Drake's voice mirrored the object terror that held him. "I—I did lie, Briggs! I did carry the word to Woodburn, just like you said. But it was because of what you did to me in Loder. I was sorry about it, soon as I had time to think. An' I did lie to Jackson—told him I headed straight for the hideout when I left Loder. But how you ever found out—"

A low laugh came from Brad Towler's lips. "I've got ways, Drake—ways that a dumb ox like you would never understand. Other ways of keeping you in line that you'll never know about until it's too late."

Then his voice hardened again—bit deep into Bobcat Drake's hide. "You and your partner jumped me here. Threatened to pistol-whip me. That don't sound none like you're sorry."

Now Brad Towler moved a step nearer the trembling outlaw. He leaned a little forward, staring at him in the dim starlight. Bobcat Drake's face was a pasty blob. But his eyes were wide and filled with deadly fear.

BRAD'S gun prodded the big outlaw's ribs. "Reckon I'd best let you have it—now. No use putting it off any longer." Brad's voice was level and cold.

"Don't shoot!" Bobcat Drake half screamed. "Don't gun me down! I'll—I'll do anything you say! I'll be your man instead of Sonora Jackson's! I'll help you take over the outfit! I'll—"

Brad Towler smiled coldly. "You're scared half out of your hide, Drake. You'll crawl on your belly like a snake—you'll make all kinds of promises—until you think you've got another chance!"

"I swear that I'll—" Drake began, his voice high and thin.

Brad Towler hesitated for a second. Then he took a backward step. "What will Sonora Jackson say when I tell him you stopped at the Lazy L on your way here—that you told Dave Woodburn that I was—"

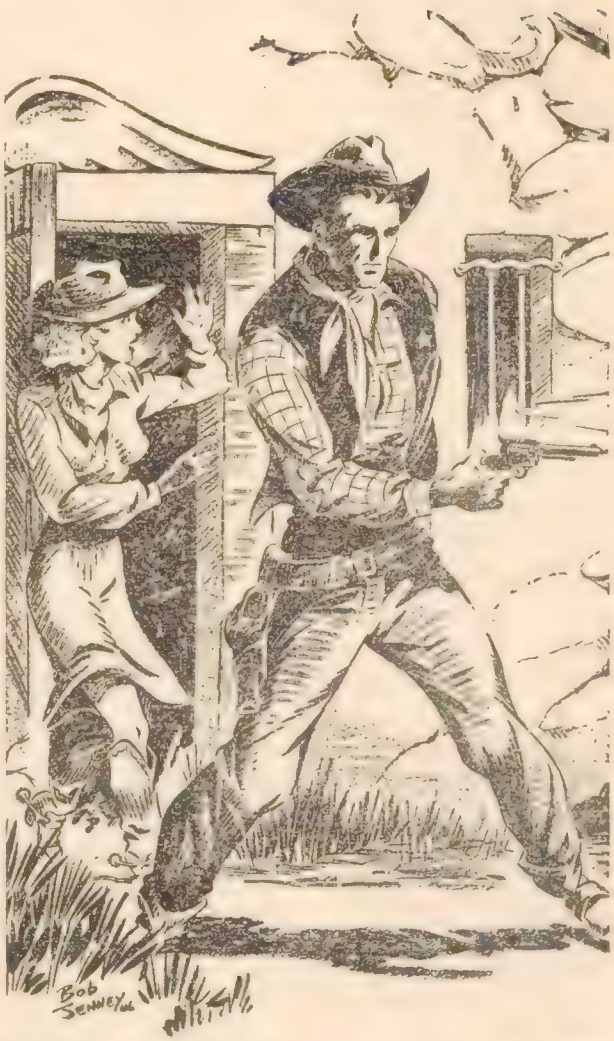
"Nobody in the outfit knows it! Nobody but you and me and old Woodburn!" Bobcat Drake pleaded. "Don't tell him! I'll do anything—show you where Jackson hides his swag! I'll help you—"

Brad Towler laughed shortly, harshly. "You'd double-cross Jackson to save your hide, huh? All right—I'll make a deal. I'll let you live—as long as you play it my way. You're my man—you'll do whatever I ask. And to make sure, I've fixed it so Sonora will find out just what happened today, if you try to back-shoot me. Back in Loder is a man who knows—and he's set to tell Jackson if you try any tricks."

"I'll not try to cross you—but you're not telling—"

"You're safe, as long as you take my orders," Brad said evenly.

Now he gestured toward the still unconscious Hamer with his gun-muzzle. "Pick up that carrion, Drake. Throw him across his horse and hog-tie him to the saddle. We're on our way up the canyon—to meet up with Jackson—all three of us."



Without a word, Bobcat Drake turned and staggered to his partner's side. He was still weak, and his eyes were hazy. But deadly fear gave him the strength to lift Hamer and swing him across his shoulder. Now he plodded with his burden toward the horses, tethered a little way back in the brush.

Brad Towler trailed right at his heels. He watched as Drake tied the still unconscious Hamer to the saddle. Then he swung onto his roan.

Drake turned unsteadily and made for his own horse.

"Lead the way," Brad ordered. "And remember—my gun is covering the middle of your back."

FOR AT LEAST three miles the trail led up the narrow canyon. Three times during those miles the slash made an abrupt bend. More and more Brad Towler came to admire Sonora Jackson's choice of a headquarters. For never had he seen a spot more easily defended against invaders, more snug and secure against all attack.

And apparently the outlaw leader had felt this security more than ever on this night. Probably counted upon Bobcat Drake and Hamer to give ample warning of any danger from behind. For Brad and his two companions did not pass a living being—did not hear a sound or see a movement that might mean guards on the trail.

Around the last bend, a slash of orange light brought the puncher erect in his saddle. He called softly to Bobcat Drake, just a few yards in front of him. "That Jackson's hideout, huh?"

"That's it," Drake grunted, half turning in his saddle. "You're not forgettin' your promise?"

"I'm not forgetting," Brad said evenly.

Another hundred yards. Now the sprawling structure of the outlaw headquarters loomed in shapeless shadow ahead. The light came from the window in front. Brad could make out the hitchrail between him and the light, and he headed for it.

Bobcat Drake's horse stopped with its nose over the rail. But the big outlaw did not dismount—yet. He waited until Towler's roan edged up beside him. Brad smiled a little in the darkness. Bobcat Drake was taking no chances.

"Stay put—until I give the word!" Brad ordered.

Then he moved to the narrow porch that fronted the building. He did not attempt to hide the sound of his coming. And as his booted feet crunched the gravel, he saw a form move swiftly across the oblong of light.

"Hello, inside!" Towler's voice was crisp and assured.

"Open the door! Come in—with your hands away from your holsters!" Brad recognized Sonora Jackson's voice, and read the uncertainty in it.

The door swung open at the young puncher's touch. He stood in the opening, broad shoulders almost filling it. His blue eyes swept the eight or more men in the big room. A cold smile spread slowly across his face as he read the warying expressions on the countenances of Sonora Jackson's outfit.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything important. But I've got a ranny outside that says he lives here. He's got a friend with him that's sound asleep."

A puzzled frown puckered Sonora Jackson's brow. "You've—got what?"

"Man who says his name is Bobcat Drake. Looks more like a polecat to me. Friend's name is Hamer, or some such. Tried to bushwhack me back along the trail, but were kind of clumsy at it."

Apparently Jackson had regained his composure. A look of relief, with just a touch of puzzled wonder, crossed his face. Then a smile that seemed to indicate he had found something amusing about the whole thing. "Come on in—stranger!"

Then he gave an order to two of his men. "Go bring Bobcat Drake and Hamer inside."

As the men moved with alacrity toward the door, Sonora Jackson turned again to Brad. "You're Buck Briggs, I take it?"

"I've been called that," Brad Towler said evenly.

"And what's your business, up here on this range?"

Brad's eyes narrowed. "I might ask the same of you, Jackson. I go where I take a notion—and ask permission of nobody."

Sonora Jackson grunted. Then his glittering eyes bored into Brad Towler's. The young puncher knew this was the critical moment; he could almost feel the unblinking stares of the rest of the outlaw outfit upon him.

He knew that he was taking a risk—a deadly dangerous risk in coming here as Buck Briggs. Apache Crock-

ett had told him that there was no one in the outfit—no one in all the Sangre de Cristos who had seen Buck Briggs to know him. But perhaps one of these men—

Then Jackson spoke again, and Brad felt a little sense of relief. He had passed muster—for a little while, at least. Nobody had spoken up to challenge his identity as Buck Briggs.

"Reckon Dave Woodburn was following you," Jackson said. "We had a little run-in with him a while back—and we figured he was aiming on trailing us into the canyon. But the way he turned tail and run, when we jumped him, he must not have been looking for so many guns."

Brad nodded. "Seems like someone gunned Woodburn's brother a year or so back. He figures it was me. Rode into Loder to snake me out of jail, and string me up. I made a break for it—and here I am."

14

BEFORE Sonora Jackson could question Brad Towler further, Bobcat Drake stood in the doorway. His craggy face was twisted with a mixture of fear and deadly anger. Behind him, two men carried the unconscious Hamer. Jackson grinned in wry humor. "Looks like you run into the business end of a cyclone, Drake. Let's hear your side of it."

In growling, bitter words the burly ruffian related what had happened, back up the canyon trail. He colored his story just a little to put himself in better light, glancing at Towler as he talked.

Brad's face was expressionless, except for the little crinkle around the eyes. But Jackson and his outfit burst into coarse laughter when Drake finished. Then the outlaw leader turned to Brad. "Could be you're near as good as your reputation makes out, Briggs. Bobcat Drake's no ignorant dogie when it comes to a scrap."

Then the amusement on the outlaw's face died, and a scowl replaced it. "But if you think you're horning in on this range, you've headed up the wrong trail. I'm running things here; do you understand that?"

Brad Towler nodded. "I'm not trying to edge into your lay. Just got tired of working on my own, and figured I'd like to ride with you for a spell."

"On the same lay as the rest? Same cut as theirs?"

For just a moment Brad was silent, his brows drawn down as if pondering the proposal. Then he nodded. "Provided the cut gets bigger as I earn it. And—provided I get a chance to even things with that lawman's hired hand, Apache Crockett."

For a tense second Sonora Jackson did not answer. His shifty eyes narrowed. "You're on," he said at last. "You can ride with us—and you'll get your chance at Apache Crockett. I've got a little matter to settle with him, myself." Then his voice hardened. "But remember—you're a stranger. We'll be watching you plenty close; you'll stop a slug if you try anything funny."

Brad Towler drew a long breath. Now for the first time he dared to let his eyes stray from the big outlaw. His gaze swept the long, low room. It was lighted by two swinging brass oil lamps. Two doors, tightly closed broke the back wall. A single narrow window at each side. Crude homemade furniture—double-deck bunks.

But it was the group of hard-bitten men that held Brad's attention. He searched each face, half afraid that he would read some knowledge of his deceit upon it. He was taking a long chance that none of the outlaws had ever seen Buck Briggs. Apache Crockett had said Briggs was a lone-wolf—but he could be mistaken.

Varying expressions painted the faces of the Jackson outfit—envy, hatred, greed—but recognition was not among them. Brad's breath came slower, easier as he knew that the first test was passed safely.

Then Sonora Jackson was speaking again, that twisted smile on his stubbled face. "Tomorrow night you'll get your first chance, Briggs. One that you'd ought to like—plenty."

"Apache?" Brad asked quickly.

Sonora Jackson shook his head. Then he half turned, and raised his voice. "Cutler, tell the gal to bring in the jug and four-five tincups!"

"The girl?" Brad Towler's voice was low and even, but his heart pounded against his ribs.

Sonora Jackson's leering smile widened. "Yeah. A gal that's visiting us—while her sweetheart is spending his time in prison."

Brad Towler nodded. He understood—now. Anger seethed like liquid fire through his veins. But he held his impulse in firm check. His fingers fumbled in his pocket—clutched the gold locket and drew it out. He held it in the palm of his hand, as Sonora Jackson gestured toward the slab table. The rest of the outfit drew up chairs.

THE OUTLAW leader shot a look around him. He caught the tense, interested look in many pairs of eyes. His gloating grin broadened. Then his gaze held upon Brad Towler. "Tomorrow night we're raiding Woodburn's Lazy L. And this time we're set to follow through. He's getting too big for his chaps, and I aim to cut him down to size."

"But Crockett—" Brad began.

"Crockett can wait," Sonora Jackson growled. "Woodburn asked for trouble—and he's getting it. Tonight we're drinking on it."

Towler drew a sharp breath. This was something he had not counted on. He expected a little more time to get the lay of things—to get acquainted with Jackson and his manner of action.

"You're wasting no time—" he began.

But now one of the doors at the back of the room creaked open. Every eye turned in that direction. For a girl stood in the opening—a tall, slender girl with lovely elfin face and lithe grace of body. Breathless shyness and fear were mirrored in her wide brown eyes.

She carried an earthenware jug in one hand and two or three tincups in the other. She took a hesitant step toward the table. Sonora Jackson's coarse voice brought her up with a start. "Hurry up the liquor! We haven't got all night to wait!"

Towler's fingers fumbled with the locket now. His hand was out of sight beneath the edge of the table, as the girl moved toward them. He caught the terror—and something else—in her eyes, as her gaze met his for an instant.

Then she was beside the table. She set the cups down, and drew the cork from the jug. Brad darted a glance at Jackson and the others. They were watching her like wolves surrounding a wounded antelope. Brad's right hand opened a little, as the girl stood beside him for a second.

Just for an instant he thought she would not see the tiny bit of gold in his palm. Then her eyes widened still more. Brad saw the sudden start that swept her. Her hands trembled ever so slightly, and her lips parted as if she would speak.

"Careful with that tequila!" Sonora Jackson growled.

Brad lifted his left hand to his face—brushed his lips with his fingers. It was an everyday gesture—one that might denote thirst, greed, almost anything. But the girl read it right. She drew a long, quavering breath, and the color came back to her face.

She filled the tincups, set the jug down, and turned away from the table. Brad Towler was sure she walked with a firmer tread, that her back was straighter and her chin higher.

"Plumb worthless for work," Sonora Jackson grunted. "Scared to death. Don't know she's safe with us, as long as—"

"As long as what?" Brad asked softly.

"As long as her sweetheart keeps a tight lip."

"Yeah—I—see," Brad said slowly. "But aren't you afraid she'll run out on you?"

Sonora Jackson laughed brutally. "She thinks I'm trying to get her man out of prison. Figures that I'll stop working on it, if she makes a break. We told her she had to make a hand around here, if we helped her."

"But if she's no good for work—" Brad began.

"I don't know how much her man told her. Might be she knows too much. We're keeping her here—for a spell."

"But what if she took a notion to leave, anyhow? Would you—"

Sonora Jackson laughed again. "She won't. She knows that Bobcat Drake is only waiting for me to give the word—"

Brad Towler rose abruptly from the table. "Yeah—I see. I don't hold with fighting women folks—not any. But you're running this outfit—"

"You're damned right I am!" Jackson flared, his hand moving toward his holster. "And if you get to feeling lucky—"

BRAD GRINNED. Then he stretched his arms and yawned widely. "Like I said, it's your funeral. Me, I've been right busy for the last few days. Haven't had a good night's sleep since I don't know when. I'm for hitting the hay." His eyes turned toward the bunks.

Sonora Jackson shook his head. "Just bunks enough for my outfit. Reckon you'll have to bed down at the horse-barn. If I decide to keep you on, I'll build you a bunk later."

"Plenty good," Brad Towler answered. "But I figured you might be afraid I'd run out on you. Might be able to collect right well on the information you've passed out. Some folks wouldn't think too much of your holding a girl here. That—and some other—"

Sonora Jackson grinned widely. "You were plumb willing to come here, Briggs. The law wants you worse than us. Besides, I'm offering you a chance to get square with Dave Woodburn—and Apache Crockett."

"Never needed any help in killing my skunks," Brad said evenly. "And maybe—"

"And you're forgetting that I said we'd be watching you—close." Now Sonora Jackson's grin widened. "I'm giving Bobcat Drake the job of riding herd on you. Reckon he'll like that—plenty. Nothing would suit him better than to drag down on you."

Towler answered the grin. "Bobcat Drake, huh? That don't look to be good sense; he tried to down me twice—and it didn't work. Don't know of anybody I'd rather have on my tail than him."

"A man that's been burned twice don't take any more chances with fire," Jackson grunted.

Brad turned and made for the front door. Bobcat Drake followed, seemingly a little reluctant to tackle the job his boss had set for him.

Down at the horse shed, Brad attended to feeding and watering his horse. Drake carried a smoky oil lantern, and kept close to the young puncher. Once or twice Brad thought he saw the man's hand stealing toward his holster. But each time his stare stopped the movement.

When he had finished his chores, Brad turned to the burly ruffian. "I'm spreading my blankets on the hay—and I'm sleeping. You can sit up and watch me—or you can sleep too. But don't get any ideas into your thick skull. Remember what I told you—remember what Jackson will find out, if anything happens to me."

"I reckon it's Curly Wacker—"

Brad grinned and shook his head. "Curly Wacker don't look any more trustworthy than you do, Drake. But somebody knows you set Dave Woodburn on me—and is set to tell Jackson, in case I don't wake up in the

morning."

"I wasn't aimin' on doin' anything." Bobcat Drake's voice was almost a whine, and Brad could read a tinge of fear threaded through it. "I said I'd do what you wanted—an' I meant it."

Brad Towler nodded. "Then go off somewhere—out of my sight and smell. I don't like the looks and the stink of you."

Bobcat Drake growled a curse beneath his breath, but he turned and shuffled toward a hay rick some fifty yards from the horse shed. Brad's grin widened. It was funny how easy it was to frighten a man whose guilt was strong. He knew he was safe—for this one night, at least.

He spread his blanket on a heap of hay near the open door of the shed. For a long time he lay there, relaxing his weary muscles. The feel of his own gun at his side, the stamping of his own horse inside the shed was pleasant.

But his eyes did not close in sleep. He had long ago learned to take his rest when he could without relaxing the vigilance on which his life and freedom depended. And now was certainly not the time to let down.

He closed his eyes, but his nerves and muscles were tensed again—ready for action. For there was a faint rustling from the edge of the heap of hay. His hand darted to the six-gun at his side—clutched its butt.

Then a low, pleading whimper reached his ears—a whimper that seemed strangely familiar. He drew a sharp breath—came erect in his blanket.

15

BOWIE! You damned little fool!" Brad Towler whispered.

A wriggling little form crawled over the hay. A wet little nose snuggled against his arm. A lump came to Brad's throat, as his hand felt the hurt mangled foot.

"Bowie, you poor little cuss, you came all those miles to me! You crossed those ridges and over the rocks, even when your foot was damn nigh chewed off. You came where you knew Bobcat Drake—and his bobcat holed up. Why did you do it, feller?"

The little dog answered with a joyful whimper, as he snuggled down beside the man. Brad sat there a long minute, his eyes narrowed in the darkness. He tried to fight down the thought that came to him, but cold reason told him that one decision was the only one he could rightly make.

He threw the blanket from him and pulled on his boots. "I'm glad to see you, Bowie—plenty glad! Never a man or animal ever cared that much for me before. But you can't stay. You've got to go back—back to Julia. You've got to do it, Bowie—somehow!"

Brad rose, then stooped and gathered the battered little animal in his arms. He stole from the horse shed, ears and eyes alert for any sign that he was being watched. Apparently everyone in the clearing slept—including Bobcat Drake.

Keeping to the deepest shadows, he made his way to the edge of the clearing. The little dog whimpered and wriggled in his arms, as if he knew what was about to happen. But Brad steeled himself against the animal's pleading.

Behind a huge boulder at the far edge of the clearing, he stopped. There he hunkered, his back against a tree and the little dog between his feet. He fumbled in his pocket—found the stub of a pencil and an old envelope.

By the light of a half dozen closely-shielded matches, he covered the back of the paper with tightly written words. Then he took a brass cartridge from his belt. He pried the bullet free, and emptied the gunpowder on the ground.

Now he rolled the envelope tightly, and thrust it into the brass cylinder. It fitted snugly. For a mo-

ment he hesitated, his eyes narrowed in concentration. Then he nodded. "It might work!"

Swiftly he cut a strip from his red bandanna. He wound it around the cartridge, and tied it firmly. He tested it with quick jerks—and the cartridge held. Now he fastened the little package tightly to the narrow collar around the tiny dog's neck.

He rose again, and strode another hundred yards with the dog in his arms. He set the animal down, and turned its head toward the down-trail, headed for the Lazy L a good fifteen miles away. The little dog whimpered, and edged back to Brad's feet.

"Get for home, Bowie!" Brad said sternly. "Get! I don't want you here—understand? Make tracks!"

The tiny dog inched away from the man, whimpering as if he did not understand. Brad could see the starlight reflected in the wide brown eyes, and his heart rose in his throat. He fought it back sternly.

He picked up a stick—drew it back menacingly. "G e t!" he ordered roughly. "Get for home—quick!"

Slowly, reluctantly the little dog moved away. It turned, and Brad could almost read the pleading in the luminous eyes. He took a step forward—lifted the stick. The animal scampered away in the darkness.

For a full five minutes the young puncher stood there. A strange moisture came to his eyes. "You must hate me now, feller," he whispered. "But I had to do it. You've got to get back to the Lazy L, Bowie! Got to!"

At last Brad Towler turned back. He circled wide, and cut past the hay rick where Bobcat Drake had spread his blanket. He walked easy, as he neared the spot. But apparently his caution was not necessary. It looked as if the burly ruffian was deep in sleep.

BRAD INCHED closer to the prone man. For a full minute he looked down at the shadowy figure, outlined in the dim star light. He shook his head slowly. For some reason he did not trust the big outlaw, even though he did hold the club of fear over him.

It looked as if Bobcat Drake was asleep, right enough—too much like it. Brad hunkered beside the man, silent and motionless. For another minute he stared at the gray blob that was Bobcat Drake's face.

Then he was rewarded. For he saw the faintest flicker of an eyelid—the momentary glint of starlight on a half-opened eye. Almost immediately it was closed again, but Brad had seen enough.

He spoke softly, evenly, as if he were talking to a chance aquaintance, casually. "Your conscience must be troubling you, Drake—won't let you sleep. Or maybe you've been out of your blanket and wandering around the clearing—sticking your nose into something you'll be sorry for."

Bobcat Drake mumbled something, as if he had just been awakened from deep sleep. He opened his eyes a little—closed them again. He stretched his thick arms, and half rolled over, his back toward Brad.

A thin smile flicked the young puncher's lips. "Could be you've been following me, huh? Forgot the promise you made—and what's bound

to happen, if you try to trick me."

Now Bobcat Drake sat up slowly, still grumbling under his breath. But the feigned note of sleep was gone from his voice. In its place was the higher pitch of fear. "I—I wasn't followin' you, Briggs! Honest, I wasn't! I saw you movin' around—saw you head for the edge of the clearin'. But I didn't follow—not even when I thought you was runnin' out on Jackson. Don't know what you was up to—an' like you say, it ain't none of my business."

Brad knew the man was right—knew that he had not followed. For in the near presence of Bobcat Drake, the little dog would have given warning by his growls. But he did not tell Bobcat Drake of his conclusions.

"Maybe you don't remember, Drake! I don't like you—not any. Don't like a man who tries to get me strung up—who jumps me in the dark—who sets bobcats on little dogs. I'd as soon gun you down as look at you—a little sooner, maybe. And I'll do it, if you don't watch your step."

Brad could see by the set of the man's shoulders, by the way he lifted his shaggy head, that anger was beginning to wipe a little of the fear from his slow brain. Maybe he had played his string a little too far. But if a showdown with Bobcat Drake had to come, it might as well be now. He could not ever feel quite safe as long as Bobcat Drake was around.

"Another thing," Brad continued evenly. "I sort of like that girl—Ruth Morgan—at first sight. And I wouldn't take it none too kindly if you should lay a hand on her."

Bobcat Drake half rose, and his hand went stiffly toward his holster. "Damn your hide! You've got no business tellin' me what to do—and what I can't—where Ruth Morgan is concerned! I knowed her long before you ever showed up. An' if anybody—"

"And if anybody touches her, there'll likely be gunplay," Brad finished evenly.

"As far as gun-play goes," the big outlaw blustered, "two can play it as well as—"

HE STOPPED short, and his breath came in a gusty gasp. For Brad Towler had moved so swiftly that the gesture could hardly be caught in the starlight. But there was no mistaking the yawning muzzle of the six-gun that stared Bobcat Drake squarely in the eyes.

"Two *can* play at it." Brad's voice was low and soft. "But in most any game, one man's better than another. I'm not bragging—not any—when I say I've got you considerable shaded in this one."

Bobcat Drake sat down heavily on the hay. And now that deadly fear was back in his voice—the fear of a man who has twice been bested by another, and is facing a third showdown. "I—I guess I sorta went off half-cocked," he said hesitantly. "But you shouldn't have drove me so hard. A man can stand just so much before he blows up. I ain't aimin' on trickin' you—ain't aimin' on swappin' lead with no gunslick like Buck Briggs. I've heard plenty—"

"Now you're beginning to get a little sense into your hard head," Brad answered. "I want a little straight talk out of you. Then I'll not bother you any more—tonight."

"I promised you I'd tell you anything you wanted to know about the outfit—help you—"

"I'm not worried about Jackson," Brad said evenly. "He and I will hit it off all right. And as for the rest of his outfit, they'll do what he says. What I want to know is where the girl—Ruth Morgan—sleeps. And who is guarding her."

Bobcat Drake flared up again. But this time he did not make a move toward his gun. "Damn you, if anyone gets the gal—"

"Take it easy, Drake," Brad said without raising his voice. "All I want is a little talk with her. Seems like I might know some of her kinfolks. She looks sort of like somebody I know. Been bothering me ever since I saw her. Likely I'm mistaken, but I want to find out."

Drake grumbled deep in his throat, but he answered reluctantly. "Holes up in the leanto, just off the kitchen. Nobody guards her. Nobody'll bother her—without Sonora Jackson's say-so—and that goes for you, too. An' she couldn't get far, even if she was a mind to run out. But she ain't a mind to. Thinks she can do her jailbird man more good by stickin' here." A humorless chuckle came from his lips.

"Seems to me that hombre is a right lucky man, even if he is in jail," Brad said drily. "Not many girls would stand for a pack of coyotes like this to help any man."

Then he rose, his hand still close to his holster. "You can go to sleep now. Or if sleep don't come, just stay put! I wouldn't want to drill you—tonight."

"Damn you, I ain't used to bein' ordered around—not even by Sonora Jackson!" Bobcat Drake growled.

"Lay down—and shut your big mouth! Shut it—and keep it shut!" There was deadly menace in Brad Towler's voice.

Bobcat Drake settled back in his blanket. Brad turned, a thin smile on his lips. He had guessed Bobcat Drake right. A man who would take delight in setting a bobcat on a little dog was a coward at heart. He was certain he had nothing to fear from the burly ruffian, unless Drake was sure the odds were heavily weighted in his favor.

BRAD MOVED back to the horse shed and found his blanket in the darkness. He crawled beneath it, and rose to a sitting position. The blanket was like a tent over his head. Any light he would make beneath it would be shielded from sight.

He fished another scrap of paper from his wallet, and found the stub of pencil. By the uncertain light of matches, half blinded by the sulphurous fumes, he scribbled a dozen or more words. Then he opened the locket Tom Crockett had given him. He folded the paper in a tiny square, and placed it inside the locket.

He threw the blanket from him now. For a moment he sat there in the darkness, gulping huge mouthfuls of pure air. His ears were alert for any sound, his eyes for any movement. The clearing was as silent as death. At last he rose and moved like a shadow toward the cabin.

He reached the back door—stood there with his ear to the slab for a full minute. He could hear faint sounds from inside that might be snores from sleeping men. Now and then the creak of a bunk as someone turned in his sleep. Nothing more.

He inched to the left, keeping close to the wall. In a moment he stood beneath the narrow window of the low-roofed leanto. Again he listened intently. Still no sound or movement to warn him of danger.

Now his hand went out to the window itself. His fingers found the

cross-bar of the sash. He pushed upward gently—then with all the strength of his forearms. But the window did not budge. He had not counted upon it being barred or locked, for in the range country locks and bars are few and far between.

For a little while he flattened himself against the wall in the darkness. There was only one thing left—he must enter the back door and make his way to the inside door of the leanto. Or he must rap loudly enough on the window to awaken Ruth Morgan.

Either way seemed filled with deadly danger. But at least if the sound brought the men awake while he was outside, he had a fair chance to escape. But if he were caught prowling inside the house, his life would be worth no more than a plugged nickel.

At last he turned once more to the window. He took his jackknife from his pocket. Muffling it as best he could with his hand, he rapped softly on the glass. Three times—and no sound or movement from the leanto. He rapped again, louder and sharper. The sound seemed loud to him—plenty loud enough to awaken the sleeping men and bring them charging out.

He turned his back to the window, and crouched low, his hand hovering over the butt of his six-gun. His eyes were upon the back door of the house, and his ears were sharpened to catch the first thud of feet.

But instead, there came another sound. At first a faint scraping—then the creak of a window raised slowly and carefully. Brad Towler whirled sharply on his heel. His hand was still close to his gun-butt.

But now he saw the white blur of a face at the leanto window—caught the sound of swift and uneven breathing of someone who was excited or frightened.

He moved closer to the window, and stepped back a little ways from the wall. He knew that he loomed shadowy and vague against the starlit darkness. Knew that whoever looked from the window would know that there was only one person outside.

His voice was low, as he talked swiftly. "You're Ruth Morgan—the girl Tom Crockett asked me to find. You don't know me—but here is the locket Tom said would be the sign that I'm a friend. Take it—open it—read what's on the paper inside. Do exactly what it says. I'm counting on you."

A slender white hand reached out from the window, palm upward. Brad Towler dropped the locket into it. The hand was withdrawn quickly.

The trembling voice, almost a whisper, held a note of excitement, wonder—and more than a little fear. "I—I saw the locket—tonight. I—I wondered—"

The words broke off short. For the sound of heavy feet came from the cabin itself. Brad Towler spoke swiftly, sharply—but his voice was low. "Call me Bobcat Drake! Tell me to get out! Talk loud and scared!"

16

BRAD TOWLER took a backward step. He pulled the brim of his hat low over his face. He hoped that whoever was prowling would not be carrying a lantern. But he was taking no chances.

Then, at almost the instant the door opened, Ruth Morgan's voice came high and thin. "You, Bobcat Drake! Get away from my window! Don't you dare come any closer! I'll call—"

Brad leaped back into the darkness. A smile flicked his lips. Ruth Morgan had acted quickly—had caught the meaning of his instructions. A girl fit to ride the river with, he thought. A girl Tom Crockett could be proud of.

Now he whirled and raced for the horse shed, bending low as he ran. Behind him, he could hear another voice that he recognized as Sonora Jackson's. He shot a glance

back over his shoulder—saw the burly form silhouetted against the dim light from inside the house.

Now he heard Ruth Morgan answer Jackson's question, but he could not catch the words. Then he was back at the shed. He pulled off his boots quickly, unbuckled his gun-belt and put it beneath his war bag, and slid under his blanket.

He hardly had time to rumple his hair and take on the semblance of deep sleep before he heard the tramp of heavy feet coming his way. He opened his eyes a trifle—caught the gleam of light from the swinging lantern. He closed them again, quickly.

The footsteps neared—stopped within a foot of his ears. For an instant there was no sound. Then Jackson's rough voice. "You, Briggs! Wake up!"

Brad Towler opened his eyes slowly, closed them quickly—then opened them wide. His knuckles rubbed them as if he would brush the haze of sleep from them. He sat up slowly in his blanket, his shoulders sagging.

His voice was thick as if with sleep, when he spoke. "What d' you want? Why you waking me up this time of night? You're lucky I didn't come up shooting!"

"I'd have drilled you before your gun slid from the leather!" Jackson growled.

Then his eyes strayed around the circle of ruddy light cast by the smoky lantern. "Where's Bobcat Drake? I set him to ride herd on you!"

Brad Towler grinned crookedly. "I didn't like the smell or sight of him. Chased him over to the hay rick. Reckon you'll find him holed up there."

"Get up!" Jackson ordered gruffly. "We'll have a little talk with him. I want you to see what happens to a man who disobeys me."

"Hell, I didn't need watching," Brad said. "And you didn't tell him to sleep under the same blanket with me. He can watch me from over there as well as here."

"You're barking down the wrong prairie-dog hole," Jackson grunted. "This is something else again."

"Don't care what it is," Brad said, sinking back into his blanket. "I'm sleepy. This is no time of night to be prowling around. And I don't care a damn what Bobcat Drake—"

But now he stared straight up into the yawning muzzle of Sonora Jackson's six-gun. "I said get up!" Jackson's voice was even, but there was a raspy note in it.

Brad grinned again. "That's a right good persuader you've got in your fist."

HE THREW back his blanket and reached for his boots. When he had drawn them on, he found his gun-belt and buckled it around his middle. He rose to his feet and stretched his arms, yawning widely. "Let's go, boss." There was a note of sardonic amusement in his voice. But apparently Jackson did not catch it.

"That's better!" he growled. Then he turned and headed for the hay rick, the lantern still swinging in his left hand. Brad followed at his heels.

Bobcat Drake still lay beneath his blanket on the hay. He did not move, as Sonora Jackson and Brad Towler approached. And the light of the lantern showed that his eyes were tightly closed. Brad noticed that his chest rose and fell in swift rhythm—not slowly and evenly as a sleeping man's should. But if Jackson saw that, he gave it no heed.

The outlaw leader thrust out a booted foot and caught Bobcat Drake in the ribs with a sharp toe. Drake howled—jerked to a sitting position, his hand rubbing his side. He looked at Sonora Jackson in the lantern light. Then his gaze turned to Brad Towler. "What in hell—" he began.

"I told you to leave that girl alone!" Jackson said. "But the very first chance you get, you go prowling around her window—trying to bust in on her!"

Bobcat Drake's gaze swung from Brad to Jackson—and back again. His voice was a growl, as he spoke

to Brad. "What you been tellin' the boss? You know damned well I didn't—"

"Didn't tell him half I could," Brad said evenly.

For a second Bobcat Drake gulped. It was plain that he caught the significance of Brad's words. Brad thought how much he looked like a trapped coyote, there on the hay. He could not repress a little smile. "I didn't—I swear I didn't—" Drake began.

Sonora Jackson carefully set the lantern on the ground beside him. Deliberately he reached down and grasped Bobcat Drake by the collar. In spite of the man's huge bulk, he lifted him with deceptive ease. For a second the two men faced each other.

"As long as you're riding with me, you obey my orders!" Jackson growled. "Just in case you're a mind to forget it—"

The outlaw leader's fist drew back—flashed out. It caught Bobcat Drake on the point of the jaw. The ruffian's eyes went glassy. He took a stumbling backward step—collapsed in a heap on the hay.

Just as deliberately, Jackson rubbed his knuckles, picked up the lantern and turned to Towler. "This time it was Bobcat Drake. Next time it might be any of the rest—even you."

Without another word, he turned and headed for the house. Brad Towler stood there watching, until the big man disappeared inside. He shook his head. Jackson would be a hard man to beat, hand to hand. And with a six-gun—

Now he looked down at the shadowy figure on the hay. Bobcat Drake was plainly out cold, and would be for some hours. Strangely, Brad felt a little sorry for him—and a little ashamed of himself. Until he remembered a certain little dog—and Bobcat Drake inside a circle of men.

Brad turned on his heel, and made for the horse shed. This time, when he crawled into his blankets, sleep came almost instantly. And it was daylight when he awakened. Men were moving about the clearing. And

the first words he heard were Sonora Jackson's barked orders. The outlaw leader had not forgotten his promise to raid the Lazy L.

TWICE DURING the long day, Brad Towler saw Ruth Morgan. Once when she served the noon meal, and again as she stood at the back door, scanning the tumbled peaks and ridges. But she did not give any hint by words, looks or action that she had read and understood the contents of the scrap of paper in the locket.

But it did seem to Brad that she held her head a little higher, that her eyes were brighter. On his part, he made no attempt to speak to her—even to get near her. He had done the best he could for the time being. The rest was up to her.

He met up with Bobcat Drake once or twice during the day, too. And each time he grinned and rubbed his jaw meaningly. Drake scowled and cursed beneath his breath, but he did not speak. Brad knew that Drake would not miss any chance to get back at him. But he was just as sure of his own ability to best the big ruffian in anything he started.

Many times, as the day dragged to a close, other thoughts came unbidden to Brad Towler. Thoughts of

Julia Woodburn—her chestnut hair and lovely face. The silver lilt of her voice and the depth of her eyes.

He thought, too of Tom Crockett, back there in that grim Montana prison—of the man who had framed him—had buried him behind those thick walls. He thought of Apache Crockett, Tom's older brother—the green-eyed, cold-faced kingpin of Loder. The strange man to whom he owed his life twice over.

And inevitably the memory of his father and brother returned to him—returned to fan the flame of hatred for Sonora Jackson, who had so ruthlessly gunned them down. It was all he could do to resist the impulse to have it out with the killer right now. But he must have the proof of perfidy that would release Tom Crockett, bring the look of happiness back to Ruth Morgan's eyes. That would erase the hatred in Julia Woodburn's heart.

He did not dare to think of the little dog, and its chances of reaching the Lazy L with its message. He could imagine a thousand things that might happen in those fifteen miles of grim mountains and ravines. But unless the little animal made it, the odds would be almost insurmountable.

It was with almost a feeling of relief that the young puncher watched the dusk deepen into darkness—heard Sonora Jackson call his men to the big room. He followed, and listened to Jackson's terse orders. "You—Drake, Hamer and Cutler—take the short cut, and come down from the north. Circle and come down the draw from behind the corrals. Tolbert, you and Bragg and Simpson guard the trail that leads up the valley. Give me the owl hoot when you're set. Won't be much of a job, for the trail's narrow between the rocks."

The men listened, nodded and instinctively drew into groups as they were named. Then Jackson turned to the others. "The rest of us will come up in front. Likely to be two or three rannies watching for Buck Briggs—hoping he'll show up to have it out with Dave Woodburn. The others will be in the bunkhouse—asleep. Be easy to get them cold."

Then Jackson faced Towler. "You, Briggs—you'll ride alongside of me. Not that I don't trust you—but I'm plumb anxious to see if you're as salty as your reputation."

"That's right where I'd choose to ride," Brad said grimly.

Twelve shadowy figures swept out of Sonora Jackson's hideout, and took the southeast trail toward the Lazy L. Brad hitched his holster further front, and tested his six-gun. It slipped easily in the oiled leather.

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BUT IF Brad Towler rode easily, his face without expression and his nerves and muscles steady, it was because of the grim power of his will. Behind his calm face was a turmoil of seething thoughts.

Had Ruth Morgan followed his instructions? Had the tiny dog gotten through? Would Sonora Jackson follow the pattern Brad had read in the burly ruffian?

As they clattered out of the canyon's mouth and took the left turn, Brad's narrowed eyes tried to pierce the gloom. If the message had gotten through, there should be watchers stationed at varying intervals along the trail to warn the Lazy L. But if they were there, they had hidden their movements cleverly. For not a sound or a movement told of their presence.

Three hours of hard riding brought the dozen raiders to within a half mile of the Lazy L ranch house. A faint gleam of light came through the trees and brush. But as they watched, it snuffed out.

"All in bed—except one," Jackson grunted. "Not looking for us so soon. Figure they've got us scared off. Reckon that one is old Dave Woodburn himself—and it won't

take long for him to drop off. We've got 'em—cold."

Brad noted the cruelty in the outlaw leader's voice. Again he wondered just what had fanned the man's hatred for Dave Woodburn to this pitch. It certainly was not because Woodburn had bested the Jackson outfit at the Lazy L the night before, for the tables had been turned later on the same night. But there was no time to dig into that any deeper right now.

Back two or three miles, Bobcat Drake, Hamer and Cutler had taken the short cut, and already were working their way down behind the corrals. Three others detached themselves from the outfit, and moved off to the right to guard the trail against the flight of any Lazy L man who might win free. Sonora Jackson, Brad Towler, Ackerman and Squint Riley rode warily toward the clearing.

Sonora Jackson spoke from the corner of his mouth. "You, Briggs—take Ackerman and circle the house. Watch the back door. Riley and I will come up from in front."

Brad Towler edged his horse a little closer to the outlaw leader. His voice was low, but there was a thread of steel running through it. "We're close to the showdown, Jackson, and I don't aim to stick my head into a noose without knowing the whole lay. I'm after Dave Woodburn's scalp—and with good reason. To save my own. But you—there's no reason that I know of—" His words trailed off meaningly.

Sonora Jackson straightened in his saddle, and his hand strayed toward his holster. "Why, damn your hide. I'm running this outfit. It was your idea to join up, and now you're playing square, or—"

Towler's even voice broke in on him. "I know why you hate—and fear—Apache Crockett. But Dave Woodburn—"

"I hate Crockett—hell, yes. But I don't fear him," Jackson growled. "I'll match guns with him any time. And Dave Woodburn is a friend of Crockett's. Does that set you straight?"

"Not—quite," Brad said slowly.

"If that was it, you'd be raiding Apache Crockett's place in Loder. There's some other reason why you want to wipe out Dave Woodburn." He stopped short as a sudden idea struck him.

Then he leaned a little closer to Sonora Jackson. "I've—got a sort of —idea—"

SONORA JACKSON swung in his saddle and faced Brad Towler in the darkness. The young puncher knew that he was close to death in this instant. But it was a chance he had to take. His own hand dropped to his holster, as Sonora Jackson made a similar move.

"What are you driving at?" Jackson growled.

As Brad spoke again, every nerve and muscle was tense and alert. He knew that the next second would be the most dangerous he had ever lived through—if he did live through it. "Dave Woodburn was after me for gunning his brother—but I didn't do it. The man who did might figure that someday Woodburn would find out the straight of it, and then—"

It was a shot in the dark—a deadly dangerous shot, but logical. And Sonora Jackson's reaction was startling. His hand came away from his gun-butt. He relaxed in his saddle. A chuckle came from deep in his throat.

"If that's all that's worrying you, forget it. What if I did gun Dave Woodburn's brother? He had it coming to him. But all the evidence points to you—and nobody will ever make the old pelican think differ-

ent. It's not my fault he's after you, but you won't have anything to fear after tonight. We'll get him—and get him right."

Brad drew a long breath. Jackson's callous admission that he had killed Dave Woodburn's brother answered one question that had bothered him—gave the reason why the outlaw leader feared and hated the old rancher. But it also gave the young puncher an added insight.

He realized that Sonora Jackson was more than a little proud of having done the killing—and of his cleverness in throwing the blame onto Buck Briggs. But he was vain enough, too, that he was glad to have his secret discovered. "I'll forget it—for the present," Brad said evenly. "Let's go!"

Towler and the lanky Ackerman drew away from Jackson and circled the house, keeping well to the edge of the clearing. On the opposite side, they pulled out into the open and approached the house in the darkness. They halted beneath a huge cottonwood that almost overhung the structure.

Skylined for a moment, Bobcat Drake and the two who rode with him slipped past the corrals toward the south. Jackson and Squint Riley moved in from the front. As yet there had been no sound or movement from the house or the ranch yard.

Then Drake and his companions were directly between the big house and the bunkhouse. Brad tensed, as he caught the owl hoot signal that told him Simpson and the two who rode with him were set, up there on the trail.

Everything was ready now. Sonora Jackson answered the signal, then he and Riley spurred toward the house. Brad Towler hardly breathed. The next few seconds would tell whether the little dog had gotten through with his message—whether Dave Woodburn had made preparations for the raid, or whether he was doomed to die along with the rest of his outfit.

THEN SUDDENLY the door of the bunkhouse crashed open. A flood of orange light painted a slash across the rocks. A six-gun barked from down that way. Then another—and another. A flare leaped toward the sky from the hay rick beside the horse shed. It's ruddy flame lighted the whole clearing.

Leaping figures emerged from the shadows of the outbuildings. The crack of their guns came almost in a volley. Brad smiled, thin-lipped as he sat his horse in the shadow of the big tree.

But Ackerman, the lanky outlaw beside him was startled out of his grim calm. As Brad edged his horse toward the man, an oath crackled from Ackerman's lips. "Tricked, by God! They've been waitin' to bushwhack us! Somebody got word to 'em! They're ready for us—plenty!"

Then he turned in his saddle, his narrowed, close-set eyes upon Brad. The young puncher could see the suspicion in them as the leaping flames brought the angular face into bold relief. "Somebody tricked us—an' I think—I know who!"

His hand darted for his holster, as his gaze held upon Brad. The gun leaped into his hand—swung up. But Towler was already in motion; he leaned low in his saddle and jammed the rowels home.

The rangy roan surged forward charged straight at Ackerman on his bay. The slab-sided outlaw snarled another curse, as he tried to swing his gun around. But it was too late.

Brad neckreined the charging roan just a little to the left—leaned out from the saddle. His hand darted out and grasped Ackerman's belt. He gave a powerful heave—the horse charged past. Ackerman was caught off balance. He let go of his gun and grabbed for the saddle-horn—but missed.

With a yell that was a mixture of fear and anger, he pitched from his saddle. He landed upon his head and shoulders on the rocky ground. He staggered to his feet—weaved two or three steps and collapsed.

As Ackerman's horse lunged wildly—raced off into the darkness—Brad Towler swung from his own saddle and ground-anchored the roan. He whirled on his heel, leaped

to Ackerman's side and hunkered beside the man for a second. Ackerman was out cold.

Now Brad straightened, turned toward the house. He could see the glint of firelight on the window and knew it was closed. But he raced toward it. He clutched the sash, and heaved upward.

The window opened with a creak that sounded loud to his ears. But the rattle of gunfire and the shouts and curses that filled the air drowned out the sound.

Brad did not hesitate; he hoisted his lean body up and through the opening. He landed softly on the floor inside. Even in the grim tenseness of the moment, he caught himself wondering at the carpet on the floor.

It was almost pitch dark inside the room. The shadow of the big tree kept out all but a tiny glint of light from the burning hay rick. Brad could not even guess the size of the room. He took a forward step, hand outstretched.

A low voice, musical but with a thread of steel, brought him up short. "Stop where you are! I can see you plainly against the window! And I'll shoot at the first move!"

BRAD STOOD motionless, but his heart thumped against his ribs. That voice! He would recognize it anywhere—recognize and thrill to it. "Don't shoot, Miss Julia! I'm Brad Towler!"

"Brad—Towler!" The steel somehow seemed to have gone from her voice. "I—I thought— I was sure—you were one of Sonora Jackson's men who—"

But now a whimper, that was half yelp of ecstasy, came from the corner where the girl stood. The little dog dashed toward Brad in the darkness—wriggled against his legs with whimpers of joy. Brad heard the girl's sharply-indrawn breath.

Her voice was hard and cold now as she spoke. Brad knew instinctively that the gun she held in her hand had raised once more to cover his shadowy form. "You're not Brad Towler! You're Buck Briggs! I know you from the way Binky acts! You tried to trick us—killed Brad Towler, and plan to kill Uncle Dave—and me!"

"I'm Brad Towler!" There was a note of impatience in the puncher's tone. "Buck Briggs has been dead for two years! But there's no time to argue. Hear that shooting? That's not target practice!"

Now a voice, low and rumbling, came from outside the door. "Julia—who are you talking to? I told you to stay out—quiet—until the scrap is over!"

The door swung wide. Grizzled old Dave Woodburn stood in the opening, lamp in one hand and six-gun in the other. His squinting eyes beneath bushy brows held upon the young puncher. He rasped out a question.

"Who are you? What you doing here?"

Before Brad's lips could form words, Julia Woodburn answered from the corner. "It's Buck Briggs, Uncle Dave! Called himself Brad Towler, who sent the message by my little dog!"

Brad broke in quickly. "I'm not Buck Briggs, I tell you! Buck Briggs has been—"

"—dead and buried for two years," Woodburn finished. "I've talked to Apache Crockett, since you were here last night."

Brad Towler heaved a great sigh of relief. Apache Crockett had saved him time and trouble by explaining—maybe saved him a dose of hot lead, too.

"Sorry I lost my head—tried to run you down last night," Woodburn continued. "Damn glad I didn't catch—"

"You know Sonora Jackson and ten-twelve killers are outside? You believe what I wrote—and you prepared—"

"'Course I believed—'course we got ready for what was due to happen," Dave answered confidently. "We've got as many men as Jackson—all honin' to swap lead with him. I'm glad the showdown come. The range'll be well rid of him."

The yells and shooting outside seemed to grow in intensity. The bellow of six-guns came faster, more

furious. And above the sound, Sonora Jackson's harsh voice in a triumphant shout. "Keep after 'em, men! We've got 'em where we want 'em! Riley and I'll 'tend to the old man and the gal!"

"Hear that?" Brad asked swiftly. "Jackson and his men are gun-slicks—killers! Your men are good—but they're just cowpokes! They're getting whipped. Jackson will be breaking into here, pronto!"

Dave Woodburn's shoulders slumped a little, and a worried expression came into his eyes. "It does—look like—"

"You'll have to trust me—do what I say!" Brad Towler stepped toward the old rancher.

JULIA WOODBURN edged closer to the old man and the young puncher. From the corner of his eye, Brad could see the change in expression on her face. Her eyes were wide now, and her lips were parted breathlessly. The ruddy light of the lamp added a touch of color to her cheeks and lips, a sparkle to her eyes. "You're—not—Buck Briggs!" she breathed so softly that Brad barely heard the words. "You're not—Buck Briggs who killed my—"

Brad turned. His voice was slow and even, although his heart beat fast at the sheer loveliness of the slender girl. "I'm not Buck Briggs, Miss Julia. But Buck Briggs didn't gun your father, either. It was—"

But now Sonora Jackson's voice came from near the front door. Its hoarse bellow broke Brad's words off short. "The old pelican is still inside, Riley! We've got him cornered, at last!"

Dave Woodburn's shoulders squared. He growled a curse. But apparently there was one thing that he must know above all else. He spoke swiftly. "You were saying, Towler. that Buck Briggs didn't shoot my brother. Then who—"

"Wait just a minute, Woodburn. You'll find out—right from the man who knows." He brushed past the old rancher.

Then Jackson's voice came again. "The boys have got those damned cow-nurses herded inside the bunkhouse, Riley. Buck Briggs and Ackerman are guarding the back door. You and I'll bust in and take the old man—and the gal!"

Dave Woodburn started toward the door, six-gun swinging in his fist. But Brad Towler stopped him with a word. "You stay here in the dark, Woodburn. Let me handle this. But keep your ears open—and remember what you hear."

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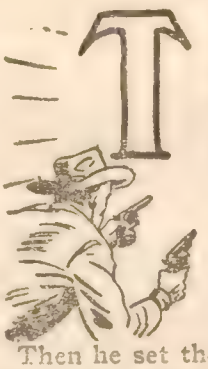


THE OLD rancher hesitated. Brad knew that he was reluctant to let anyone else skin his coyotes. But Brad picked up the lamp and strode into the main room. His eyes swept it with a swift, appraising glance.

Then he set the lamp on the heavy desk and turned the wick down a little until the corners of the room were dim and shadowy. He withdrew a half dozen steps into the half gloom.

Heavy steps pounded the slab porch. A six-gun butt rapped loudly on the door. Sonora Jackson's voice raised in an angry growl. "Open up, Dave Woodburn! We want to make talk with you!"

Brad Towler answered, his voice muffled behind his left hand. "Open the door and come in! It's never locked!"

For a moment there was a mumble of arguing voices out there on the porch. Then the door crashed open. For a full minute the black oblong of the opening was blank.

Then a figure darted across the doorway in a plain attempt to draw Woodburn's fire. Brad still stood motionless. Then a man halted in the opening for a second, narrowed eyes scanning the room. He stepped back but returned in a moment and moved warily inside. Brad caught the six-gun swinging at his thigh.

The young puncher's lips twisted

in a wry smile as he recognized Squint Riley. Sonora was taking no chances of stopping one of Woodburn's bullets. Not when he could order another to take that necessary risk for him.

"He's here—over in the corner!" Riley said. "Scared plumb to death!"

A hoarse chuckle came from Sonora Jackson's lips. He edged up beside Riley. His low-lidded gaze swept to the man in the shadow of the far corner. Then the two outlaws moved forward, their hands clutching the butts of their six-guns. They stalked half way across the room toward Brad.

"You've come to the end of your trail, Woodburn!" Sonora Jackson growled. "You've horned into our business once too often."

Brad Towler added age to his voice —pitched it high as if in deadly fear. "Why do you want to gun me. Jackson? I never did anything to you. I can understand why Buck Briggs—"

Sonora Jackson laughed loudly, harshly. "Buck Briggs, hell! You're puttin' something onto Briggs he didn't do!"

Brad drew a sharp breath. Apparently it was going to be easier than he had hoped. Sonora Jackson had admitted killing Dave Woodburn's brother earlier that night, and now it looked like he wanted to repeat it.

"You mean—Buck Briggs didn't —gun my—"

"Hell no, he didn't!" Brad could see the cruel triumph in Sonora Jackson's eyes. "I killed him—with this same gun that's goin' to do for you. And after you—Apache Crockett!"

"You—killed him! And I reckon you framed Apache Crockett's brother, too! That's why you hate him!" Brad's voice was still thin and high.

Sonora Jackson laughed again— —more loudly. "Sure, I framed him! He knew too much—just like you do—now. That's why both of you are due to stop lead!"

BRAD TOWLER heard a deep heartfelt curse from back in the darkness of Julia Woodburn's room. He knew that old Dave had heard Jackson's boasting admissions —knew that at last he had the evidence that he needed so desperately.

He hoped that the old rancher would not come charging in to face the burly killer—hoped that he had his anger under control. But he didn't dare wait any longer—didn't dare question Sonora Jackson into more admissions.

Slowly he straightened to his full heighth of an inch over six feet. His shoulders squared. His averted face turned toward the two outlaws. He could see Jackson's eyes widen with startled amazement, tinged a little with fear.

A cold smile played across Brad Towler's face. His voice was a full tone lower—slow and even. "Dave Woodburn is old—not as fast as he used to be with his irons. But he left me to deal with you and your pack of murdering coyotes!"

"Buck—Briggs!" Sonora Jackson's jaws went slack. "What are you doing in here? I told you and Ackerman to—"

"Not Buck Briggs—e x a c t l y!" Brad's voice was still so slow that it was almost a drawl. "Not Buck Briggs—but Brad Towler. Son of old John Towler—brother of Pat Towler. Surely you remember them."

"Brad Towler? You can't be! Brad Towler is in—"

"In prison—where you sent Tom Crockett? You don't keep up with the news, Jackson! I'm out of prison —and come to collect—my debt, and Crockett's!"

Sonora Jackson must have read the stark truth in the grim face of the young puncher. For he started back, not attempting to lift his six-gun in the face of the deadly calm, deadly dangerous man who faced him.

But Riley, far more frightened and for that reason swifter to act without thinking, swung his gun up. The young puncher waited until it was well on its way. Then his hand moved with the speed of a striking sidewinder.

His six-gun barked from the level of his hip. A tiny wisp of gray smoke curled up from the muzzle.

Riley turned on his heels, teetered for a second—pitched forward on his face. Jackson's eyes widened still more, and his mouth drooped slackly open.

Then those piggish eyes narrowed again. A grim, mirthless smile flicked his lips. Slowly his hands reached for the ceiling. But with the same movement, he began to back for the still opened door. Brad Towler's gun swung around to cover him, but he did not squeeze the trigger.

Sonora Jackson's humorless grin widened. "I know your tribe," he said. "Same breed of cats as Apache Crockett and his baby brother. You can't gun a man down, when his hands are high. You've got the drop on me this time—but you haven't got me. Sometime soon I'll meet up with you again—and when I do—"

Now he stood in the opening, hands still high above his head. Brad Towler tried to make himself shoot, but he couldn't do it. Sonora Jackson had read him right. The outlaw laughed harshly.

Then he stepped backward to the narrow porch. For a second Brad stood in the corner, seething anger swirling through his veins. If anyone had told him that he would have Sonora Jackson under the muzzle of his gun—and then let the killer walk out free and unharmed—he would have called that man a liar. But there it was.

SUDDENLY a gun bellowed sullenly outside. A high, shrill scream split the air. A voice that both Brad inside the room and Sonora Jackson on the porch recognized, came from down by the bunkhouse. "Get them high—and keep them high! I've got a dozen men around the clearing! The next one that moves toward his holster gets what Curly Wacker did!"

"Apache Crockett!" Brad exclaimed. "Ruth Morgan got word to him! He's come!"

Then Apache Crockett's voice again—and this time it sounded a little nearer. "You, Jackson! There on the porch! That goes for you too! Reach!"

Brad Towler tensed, and his hand that held his six-gun at his side began to come up slowly. For Sonora Jackson's burly back slid into view—almost blocked the doorway. His shoulders were hunched forward and his head thrust out as if he was trying to pierce the darkness.

And as he watched, the outlaw leader backed through the door and into the room once more. His back was still toward Brad Towler, but the young puncher knew by his posture, by the jerky way he moved that terror held him in its grasp.

Sonora Jackson had classed Apache Crockett along with Brad Towler as a man who wouldn't gun another whose hands were high. But it was plain that he did not believe it. Plain that he would rather take his chances inside with Brad Towler and Dave Woodburn than out in the darkness, facing the thin-lipped, green-eyed gun-man.

"Turn slow—and claw for the ceiling!" Brad Towler's voice was even, but there was a rasp to it that bit deep.

Jackson jerked erect—whirled on his heel. His eyes glittered with deadly fear—the fear of a cornered catamount. His gaze darted around him, as if seeking a way of escape, and not finding it. His gaze went back to Brad Towler's grim face—to the six-gun that swung at the young puncher's thigh.

Suddenly the big outlaw moved with deceptive speed. He hurtled his body sideways, and to the floor, dragging his six-gun as he fell. The heavy weapon bellowed, and Brad Towler felt a blow like a club on his shoulder.

It turned him half around—half stunned him. Again Sonora Jackson's gun roared, and again Brad felt the tearing crash of the bullet, this time in his thigh. Dizziness and shock swept over him.

The rolling form of Sonora Jackson was blurred. He could dimly see the outlaw leader stagger to his feet and head for the back door. His failing senses caught the scream from back there beyond the door—heard Dave Woodburn's rasping curse.

He felt himself falling, but with a grim effort he lifted the hand that held his gun—lifted it slowly, jerkily—an inch at a time. He swayed, holding to his feet by grim strength of will.

His glazing eyes caught the blurred form of Sonora Jackson across the sights of his gun. And even as he slumped to the floor, he squeezed the trigger. His last conscious memory was the stifled scream of the outlaw leader.

BRAD TOWLER did not have the faintest idea of how long later it was when the first consciousness of things around him returned. And the awakening was slow and agonizing. At first it was only a bright light that seemed to advance and recede with almost painful rhythm—a beat that paralleled the pound of his laboring heart.

Then the buzzing sound that almost deafened him began to fade a little, and a faraway mumble like voices barely heard crawled into his ears. Now he was conscious of something soft on his forehead—something soft and warm and comforting.

Slowly he opened one eye a crack. The bright light blinded him, and it came to him slowly that it was the light of the sun—that it was day-

light. He opened one eye again—then the other. The light bit into his brain like fire, but he did not close his eyes again.

For directly above him was a tearful but lovely face. He blinked swiftly. At first he thought he was dreaming—that the face of Julia Woodburn so close was only a hallucination. Then he caught the gasp—saw the red lips part.

"He's awake, Uncle Dave! He's alive—he's going to live!"

Brad Towler smiled painfully. He tried to raise his agonized body, but could not. He slumped back—and only now he knew he was lying on a soft bed instead of the floor. His eyes moved, as his gaze swept the room. He saw the chintz curtains, the dresser with its gleaming mirror—all the little feminine touches that marked it a woman's room. Slowly the realization came that this was Julia Woodburn's room, Julia Woodburn's bed.

Then steps sounded on the slab floor beyond the door. In another moment other faces appeared above him. He recognized them, as the haze slowly cleared from his eyes. Julia Woodburn's, tearful but radiant—Dave Woodburn's, with a strange relief softening the craggy lines—Apache Crockett's thin swarthy face with those cold green eyes—Ruth Morgan's elfin face and dark hair.

"Did—Sonora Jackson—get—" Brad began painfully.

Apache Crockett's thin lips twisted into a smile. "You got him, Brad; not for keeps, but it's better that he lives to hang. The rest are rounded up and headed for jail. All but Bobcat Drake and another who were dead when my men and I got here—and that crooked jailor, Curly Wacker who I had to gun."

But now a whimper came from beyond Brad Towler's vision—the scurry of little feet on the slab floor. A tiny ball of fur leaped onto the bed beside Brad. A warm red tongue licked his face.

A tremulous smile played across Julia Woodburn's lips. "Binky—Bowie—is your dog now, Brad. He deserves to be with the one he loves most. He brought your message over the hills and boulders—saved the lives of everyone on the Lazy L—with your help."

As Brad's hand went out weakly to the little dog's head, he turned his eyes to Apache Crockett once more. "And Tom—your brother—Dave Woodburn heard—we've got proof that Sonora Jackson framed him."

Apache Crockett nodded. "Tom will be out of prison the minute we get word to the warden. And your pardon will come right along with it. Sonora Jackson talked—told us he framed you to save the hide of one of his men."

"And—Ruth—she—"

"She followed your orders, Brad. Left Jackson's hideout as soon as you rode. Brought your message to me—word that brought me here with a posse, hell-bent."

Brad Towler felt the strength returning steadily to his bruised and wounded body now—felt a lightness in his heart that he had not known for many a year. He turned his eyes back to Julia Woodburn.

"About—Bowie, Miss Julia. I couldn't take him from you. But maybe if you'd—you'd let me sort of hang around, we could both of us—"

Julia Woodburn leaned forward impulsively. Her lips were just above Brad's. In spite of the agony that still tore at him every time he moved, he put his good arm up and drew her to him. Unmindful of those around them, their lips met in a long, breathless kiss.

The little dog wriggled and whimpered beside Brad. Apache Crockett turned away, a strange soft light in his green eyes. Dave Woodburn smiled and nodded his grizzled old head.

"Been needing a good foreman," he said. "One that'll stay put."

And Ruth Morgan's eyes held a dreamy, understanding look. For life looked clear and joyous ahead of her, too. She, more than any of the others could know of the happiness that had found Brad Towler and Julia Woodburn.

THE END

ONLY DEAD MEN LEAVE

by W.F. Day

"We've got the deadwood on your father, kid, so you'll just stick with us and take orders. And remember — the only way you ride out of here is in a pine box."

JEB BATES rode up Dead Man Canyon and came to the outlaw hideout at dusk. Moss clinging to the gray granite walls of the canyon reminded him of grizzled old men, and caused him to wonder what the future had in store for him. His eyes lifted beyond the jagged rim to the towering, timber-shrouded hills and on up to the blood red sky of this dying day. He shrugged, then dismounted. He unsaddled, turned his bay horse into a corral and stalked into the warped-board cabin.

Clover Ornsby, sharp eyed and heavily bearded, was a dim figure in the room's half light. He sat up on the side of a make-shift bunk as Jeb entered.

"Well," said Ornsby, "what did you find?"

Before answering the outlaw chief Jeb went to the stove and poured himself a cup of coffee and sat straddle a box. He glanced sullenly at Ornsby. Each time he spoke to this man he had a struggle to fight back his hatred and anger so that it wouldn't be reflected in his voice.

"Nothing much," said Jeb. "I didn't have time." He took a swallow of the black coffee. "Had to help a girl."

"A girl!" Ornsby came off the bunk in a bound.

"Yeah," said Jeb placidly. "A girl —the sheriff's daughter. She had a busted leg. Her horse fell with her and I happened to ride by and find her. Took her home." He smiled. He knew he was tormenting Ornsby. "She was a looker, too. Pretty as a picture. Stella's her name—Stella Worthen." He took another swallow of coffee. "Only trouble," he went on, "she's about twelve years old. Sheriff Worthen puts a heap of store in her. Said it was the only thing he had left. Said her mother died four..."

"Cut out the trimmings," Ornsby stormed. "You met Sheriff Matt Worthen?" He towered over Jeb, glaring down at him.

"He was mighty grateful to me for bringing his daughter home," Jeb said.

The sound of hoofs came up Dead Man Canyon and Ornsby's hands flashed to the twin .44s at his hips. Suspicion was mirrored in his lead-gray eyes. He went to the door and peered out. Jeb didn't move. The clatter of hoofs came on.

Ornsby stepped back. "Just the boys." He lighted a coal oil lamp and went over and sat on the bunk's edge. His thick lips puckered in and out and Jeb knew that he was turn-

ing over in his scheming mind the story about Sheriff Worthen's daughter.

Ornsby had sent Jeb into Bad Medicine to get a clear picture of the town. The bank there was on Ornsby's holdup list.

"You're a clean-looking kid," Ornsby had told Jeb this morning. "You ride to town and browse around. Nobody'll suspect you're one of the bunch." Jeb had welcomed the chance to get away for a few hours. He hated Ornsby and everything the outlaw stood for. Yet, he had no choice but to stay with Ornsby. "Only dead men leave my bunch," Ornsby had warned, and Jeb had gotten it first hand from some of the men. Ornsby had ridden after two members who thought they could get away and had brought them back, across his saddle, lifeless. Jeb knew of but one exception to this rule—his dad.

FOOTSTEPS sounded coming around the side of the cabin. Four men, all heavily bearded like Ornsby, crowded through the doorway—Pierce, rail-thin and dour; Apache, straight black hair and fire in his eyes; Rodale, melancholy and an accepted fatalism etched in the down swinging lines of his mouth; and Harder, squat, stiff and belligerent, eager to take a chance. They wore their guns tied down low on their thighs. Their clothes were grimy and their eyes red-rimmed from the strain of watching backtrails.

They looked sourly at Jeb in his clean levis and tan shirt and his shaved, boyish face. They always looked at him this way when they came in after a day's ride as if they didn't expect to see him still around. Jeb knew they didn't share Ornsby's confidence that Jeb wouldn't try to pull out and double-cross them.

Jeb suspected Ornsby hadn't told them everything—hadn't told them about his dad. That dated back long before their time and was Ornsby's own scheme of blood letting. Jeb recalled the many times, when a boy, his dad had packed he and his mother up and suddenly moved from a town. He had wondered about this. Now he knew. His dad had been running from Ornsby. Jeb remembered the day Ornsby had ridden to the ranch with Apache, and Ornsby had talked to Jeb's dad. Jeb was nineteen then. He hadn't heard what Ornsby had said but Ornsby had ridden away and the next day Jeb's dad had sold a bunch of cattle and ridden away with the money. He had done that for three years. Then one day he had gotten down in bed and called Jeb in.

"Son," he said, "tell your mother that you will be gone for a few days. I want you to deliver this envelop." He gave Jeb directions and Jeb had ridden away. He had found the place, came on it late one afternoon. He saw Ornsby then for the second time. They were all at the cabin, and on a table were stacks of greenbacks, mostly crisp and new. He didn't have to be told then what these men were. He knew. He handed the envelop to Ornsby and, eager to leave, turned away. But Ornsby stopped him. That's when he learned the story about his dad. He also discovered that the bunch had just held up the Logan City bank not twenty miles from Jeb's ranch.

"It doesn't matter what you know now," Ornsby had said. "You'll be riding with us." It wasn't a statement; it was a command. "Your dad's been paying me hush money to stay alive. He carries a price on his head. I can tip the law off any time. He doesn't want that; neither do you. Besides," he nodded toward the money on the table, "it could be made to look like you were in on the Logan City bank robbery. A bullet in your back and some of the money in your pocket."

Realization of his position came as a shock to Jeb. He knew then that there was nothing to do but ride with Ornsby and bide his time.

Apache stopped in front of him now, black eyes whip-sawing him. "Still too yellow to make a run for

it, eh?" he said provocatively. He turned to Ornsby. "I want the chore of going after this one when he tries for a break." He sailed his hat to a corner of the room.

"Stir up some chow," Ornsby said. "Quit riding the kid. You'll have your trigger-finger busy tomorrow."

Supper was prepared—warmed over stew and biscuits with coffee. They ate in strained silence.

When they were through, Ornsby said, "Jeb, in the morning you'll ride into Bad Medicine. You'll get your girl friend, Stella, and bring her back here. Sheriff Worthen won't be far behind you—with a posse. That's when the rest of us will hit the bank."

"That kid's got a broken leg," Jeb protested.

"I don't care if she's got a broken back," Ornsby said. "Tomorrow morning," he went on with brusk finality. "We won't be coming back here, so you leave the girl here and circle to meet us. That way we'll get the sheriff out of town."

Jeb didn't like it, didn't want any part of it. In fact, he didn't believe the sheriff would be lured out of town no matter what happened. Worthen had told him that he had instructed Stella not to ride far from town because he'd received a warning that Ornsby and his bunch were headed toward Bad Medicine.

"Suppose Worthen doesn't follow me?"

"I'll do the thinking and planning," Ornsby said. His eyes were twin fires and flames were dancing in them. "You'll do what I tell you."

Apache said, "He argues too much. I don't trust him. I got a bullet here I'd like to put into him just to make sure."

JEB POUNCED to his feet, smoky anger swirling in his eyes. His hand hovered over his gun. "I'm waiting, Apache."

Dark hatred flashed from Apache's black eyes. He was straining for a showdown.

"Sit down, Apache!" Ornsby thundered. "Jeb will do what he's ordered to do. He knows better than to go against me."

Jeb relaxed. "Don't crowd me too far," he said. "None of you."

Ornsby laughed mockingly. "There's more at stake in this deal than your own life, Jeb. Maybe you'd like for me to tip the law off about your old man. Or maybe you'll behave like a nice boy." He laughed again.

"Suppose I warned the sheriff," said Jeb.

Apache flared. "See what I mean!"

"He won't," Ornsby assured them. "Besides, the lawdog wouldn't believe him."

After that Jeb sat in sullen silence.

After a while Ornsby said, "Time to turn in," and lay down on his bunk. The others got their blankets and stretched out on the floor. Jeb was the last one. He blew out the lamp and curled up in a corner. Apache got up and spread his blanket across the doorway. Jeb knew he'd be on guard through the night.

Sleep wouldn't come to Jeb. He lay there on the floor listening to the rising snores of the outlaws—all except Apache's. Jeb realized that he was caught in a web of his dad's weaving, an inexorable web that made a man face death with a slim chance of surviving. Slowly rebellion rose in him at thought of hauling a girl with a broken leg over a torturous mountain trail. She might be crippled for life. He clamped his teeth defiantly, feeling the corded muscles ripple in his jaws.

Up on the canyon's rim he heard an owl hoot twice, then farther up in the timber a coyote started its multiple yammering. The night hours piled up on him, weighty and depressing.

AT GRAY dawn the others began stirring. Apache, a restlessness always driving him, was the first one up. He had a fire going and coffee boiling by the time the others arose.

During breakfast Jeb felt Apache's hot eyes constantly upon him. Final-

ly Apache said: "I don't want to ride into a trap today. I'll trail this hombre into town just to make sure he follows instructions."

The others looked at Ornsby and Jeb saw their eyes mirrored the same suspicions Apache expressed.

Ornsby nodded. "All right," he agreed. "But as soon as Jeb leaves town with the girl you fog to the north end of that red butte. We'll meet you there and ride in together."

"I'll make sure there are no hitches," Apache said and his black eyes were twin lances spearing at Jeb. He added, "Even if I have to kill him."

"Just keep yourself cocked," Jeb warned. He pushed from the table, went out and saddled his horse. Apache followed.

When the sun tipped the eastern horizon Jeb was coming down the trail toward Bad Medicine. From the chimneys of shack-like dwellings breakfast fires were spiraling thin gray smoke. Shortly the aromatic odor of coffee mingling with the hunger provoking smell of frying bacon drifted out to Jeb. He rode into town and racked his horse at a gnawed hitchrail in front of a restaurant. His stomach was tight and he tried to tell himself that it was from hunger for a good meal. He hadn't seen Apache since leaving the canyon but he knew the peppery little outlaw wasn't too far away and would be watching his every move.

Jeb leaned against the hitchrail watching the town stir itself to life. He was standing there, slack-hipped, when he saw Sheriff Worthen crossing the street toward him. Worthen's face was seamed and stony. His eyes were hard and all business, nothing of the friendliness of yesterday in them. Jeb read something in that set face, in those cold, blue eyes. Even before Worthen spoke Jeb knew that he was suspected. A lawman's instinct, he thought. Worthen stopped in front of him and said pointedly: "You're one of Ornsby's bunch."

Jeb considered his answer. "I was," he admitted, "but not by choice." He dared say no more. He was thinking of his dad, an old man, too old to serve a prison sentence for something that had happened years ago. It would kill him, and Jeb realized it would be the death of his mother, too. So he held his tongue and eyed Worthen.

Worthen said flatly, "Ride out of this town before I change my mind."

Jeb realized that if he did this the outlaws would gun him down. He said to Worthen, "I think I'll stay awhile." Running, he had learned from what happened to his dad, was no better than sudden death.

"Look, boy," said Worthen, "you helped Stella yesterday. For that I'm appreciative. I suspected you then. This is today. I'm giving you an hour to ride. After that..." He turned away and headed up the street toward the white frame house where he and his daughter lived.

The irony of his situation brought a tired smile to Jeb's boyish face. He shrugged. No, this was trail's end. He decided that Bad Medicine was as good a place as any to meet Ornsby, or Worthen too for that matter. But Ornsby first. He thought of Apache and pressure began building in him. He paced up and down the street. He came to an alleyway. A voice reached out at him.

"What's the stall?"

It was Apache. He appeared suddenly from behind an empty rain barrel.

"Worthen's wise to me," Jeb said.

"You put him wise then," said Apache and his eyes were thin, dangerous slits. His hand started moving toward his gun.

JEB DREW, marveling at his speed. He triggered and Apache slumped forward, half into the rain barrel. Quickly Jeb looked around, holstered his smoking gun and, seeing no one on the street, heaved the rest of Apache's body into the barrel. It was hidden from sight now. His heart pounding wildly, Jeb stepped out on the road as if nothing had happened. And it almost

seemed as if nothing had happened. But Apache was dead, and when he didn't show up Ornsby would know that something went wrong. He'd come riding into town to see.

Just then Jeb saw Sheriff Worthen hustle out his front gate and stride down the street. Two or three others came out and looked around. Jeb moved up by the hitchrail and waited. He glanced toward the red butte where Ornsby would be waiting restlessly. Then coming down the trail out of Dead Man Canyon Jeb saw a fast moving cloud of dust. He watched its rapid progress toward town. Worthen stopped to talk with two men who had come out of a store. He saw them shake their heads. The dust cloud came on and suddenly a lone rider emerged from it and fogged down the street. He hauled up in front of Worthen, not ten yards from Jeb. Jeb heard the rider's high pitched words: "It was him, all right!" the rider said excitedly. "I'd recognize Clover Ornsby from the dodgers I've seen. It's him and his bunch. There were four of them, heading this way."

Worthen glanced at Jeb, and with a deft movement of his hand took out a big, gold watch. He came forward.

"Ten minutes," he said to Jeb as if the news of Ornsby meant nothing to him.

The old fool, Jeb thought, *he doesn't know Ornsby will be coming after me, not the bank.* Jeb realized then that Worthen and Ornsby were men chiseled from the same rough granite block. Ornsby was out to make his rule that only dead men leave his bunch stick, and Worthen would back up his time limit given a man to leave. Jeb realized, too, as he looked at Worthen, that Worthen would be no match for Ornsby and the outlaws. And when the time came Worthen would go out to meet this ruthless bunch and die in the dust of his own street.

Jeb turned away, knots forming in his stomach. He mounted his horse and rode out of town. He rode fast until he came to a coulee, turned up this and made a wide circle back until he reached a willow shelter along a dry creek. From here he could see the trail Ornsby would follow into town. He dismounted and waited, his attention focused ahead. It wasn't long before he saw a thin spiral of dust coming over a rise from Red Butte. He watched it until he made out four horsemen—four horsemen from hell bent on a mission of death —his death.

They came on at a slow pace as if time meant nothing now.

JEB KEPT his eyes on the advancing horsemen, but he also kept his ears keened for sound behind him. And when he heard: "Waiting to warn Ornsby, are you?" he wasn't surprised.

He turned slowly and faced Sheriff Worthen. He looked somberly at the lawman's gnarled hands, at the holstered .45.

"I left a plain enough trail," Jeb said and smiled.

"To get me out of the way so Ornsby can have a free hand." Worthen said scornfully. "The bank is a death trap if he tries it. As for you. I'm taking you in."

"You're a fool," said Jeb. "Ornsby won't go near the bank now."

"I'm taking you in, then I'll get Ornsby."

Jeb recognized the folly of that. That's why he had left a plain trail for Worthen to follow. If Worthen was killed who would take care of Stella?

The sound of hoofs out on the main road caused Jeb to turn and he saw, through the willows, Clover Ornsby, Pierce, Rodale and Harder swinging into town.

Over his shoulder he said, "Ornsby. He's looking for me. I don't want him to look too hard."

"I'll take your gun," Worthen said.

With a desperate glint in his eyes, Jeb looked at him. He shrugged. "All right," he said. Arm muscles were taut as he took his gun from holster and held it butt first toward Worthen. The moment Worthen reached unsuspectingly for it Jeb

swung a rock-like fist, catching the sheriff on the chin point. Worthen staggered back, eyes rolling upward. Just to make sure, Jeb tapped him on the head with the gun butt and let him fall. It wasn't a hard blow but sufficient to put the old man out of action for a few minutes. Jeb tried to erase the distaste for what he had done by rationalizing, "Better a blow on the head than a bullet in your heart."

A bleak numbness seeped through him as he mounted now, and coming to the trail Ornsby had passed on, he rode into town. From overhead the sun was pouring down its morning heat. Little beads of sweat formed on Jeb's forehead and he mopped them away. He dismounted and, with a sense of dream-like existence, walked down the middle of the street. Ornsby and the others were still sitting their saddles and their stares at him were silent rays of hatred.

Ornsby's thick lips moved and Jeb knew he was talking to the others. Ornsby dismounted then, gave his double gunbelts a hitch, and waited. Jeb came on, his feet kicking up little eddies of dust. Harder, Rodale and Pierce sat their mounts, watching, their bearded faces grim masks.

"You looking for me, Ornsby?" Jeb halted.

"Where's Apache?"

"In that rain barrel over there." Jeb pointed with his left hand. "Dead."

"Dead? You...?"

"Yes," said Jeb. "It's time to make your damn rule stick, Ornsby."

Ornsby met that challenge with a swift movement of his right hand. Jeb slapped the butt of his own gun, and thunder rolled along the street. Black powder smoke made a misty screen. Jeb felt his knees sagging, threw strength into his legs for support. He knew he was hit, but he didn't know where. He felt like a pin point suspended in space. Smoke still curled from his gun. His finger was pressing the trigger but he couldn't see his target.

Ornsby was no longer standing. He lay in the dust, and would go back to it.

Jeb glanced at the three outlaws. They sat like graven images, shocked into immobility.

"Ride," he told them. "Ride while you have the chance."

Harder was the first to move. It was his right hand.

Jeb shot and Harder's gun dropped to the street.

"Ride!" he said again, and this time they did, bending low in their saddles. Jeb watched them as if they were horsemen galloping out of a bad dream. He stared down at Ornsby. The thick lips were sealed in death. From now on a hounded old man could live out his years in peace. Jeb thought of the long ride home and was suddenly eager to be on his way with the glad news.

A shadow fell across him. He looked up to see Sheriff Worthen, hatless and gray hair disheveled.

"Boy," said Worthen, "I had you dead wrong."

"Not dead," Jeb said, "just wrong." He smiled. "The hour you gave me is about up. It's time to ride." He stepped into saddle and put spurs to his horse.

"The reward!" he heard Worthen yell at him.

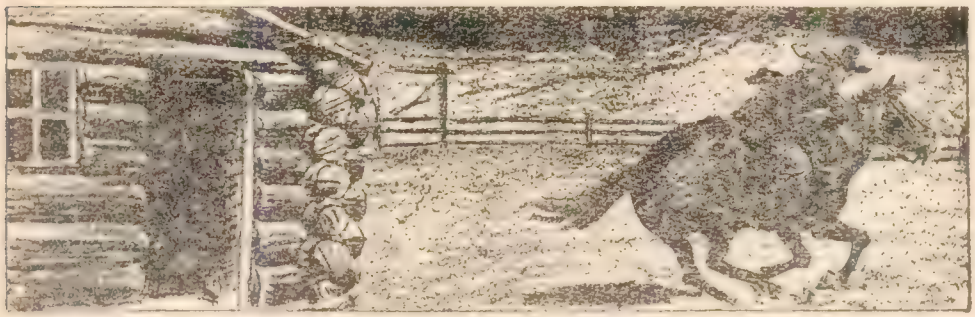
Jeb just waved his hand. He had his reward.

THE END

TEST OF GUILT

by T. W. Ford

It was just possible that Ollie wasn't guilty of this last crime pinned upon him, and Barney had to risk a test.



Barney heard his brother-in-law ride away, and knew then . . .

UNDER THE lopsided moon hanging up there in the blue-black night sky like a chunk of cheese, Barney Cross followed the cow trail through the undergrowth. From up there on the side of the hogback ridge, through gaps in the trees, he could look down on his own range in the valley. The slim wiry Cross was tired; he slumped a little over the saddle horn. It had been a hard day with he himself and Sam Tucker combing the rough broken country for strays up there, hurrawing them out of the heavy matted brush. In the afternoon, he and Sam had split up, the latter working over toward the Notch. The cowhand would rejoin him at the line rider's cabin up in the north corner sometime that night; then they'd head for home in the morning.

Cross carefully pinched out his quirly before discarding it as he followed the track around behind a giant outcropping boulder. That landmark told him he was only a short way from the cabin. Then, as he topped a hump on the side of the ridge, he spotted the ribbon of thin smoke winding skyward in the moonglow. He rose in the stirrups, frowning. It came from about where the line cabin was located, he figured.

"Ollie—mebbe," he muttered aloud, slate-gray eyes narrowing. Then he snorted ridicule at himself. Ever since Ellen had gotten that letter from her brother saying he was coming home, he had worried, brooding some. Wherever Ollie Slemp was, he had the knack of bringing trouble with him.

Could be Sam Tucker who'd cut around and reached the line camp earlier than expected. Might be some rider passing through who was bedding down there for the night. It didn't have to be Ollie, his brother-in-law. After what had happened up in the little settlement of Elk Bench a couple of nights ago, Ollie wouldn't be in this country any more. He was probably stretching horse-flesh for all it was worth southward to jump over the Border.

As he got closer to the line camp, the smoke still weaving up from its tin stack, slight-bodied Barney Cross loosened his old walnut-butted Colts in its holster. Slowed the paint horse to a walk, too. His thoughts wouldn't go away from his brother-in-law.

Some folks had called Ollie Slemp a "wild un". He never would stick as a bunkhouse hand for long out on the range. He'd get a job in town, the county seat, Wagon

Forks, for a spell, then up and quit. Then he'd hung out with the barroom toughs and saddle bums, getting into jams more than once. One night, in a five-man gun ruckus in a whisky mill, he'd put lead in a man, fatally it had seemed at first; but the sawbones had pulled the wounded man through. And some friends had sworn that Ollie had gotten involved in the gunfight through no fault of his own; he had never had to stand trial. Shortly after that, he had drifted out.

BARNEY CROSS glimpsed a corner of the cabin ahead through a narrow avenue through the tree trunks. That was just before the paint's hoofs splashed in the water of a little feeder stream. Cross reined up on the other side as he caught the rasp of rusty door hinges. Hidden in the darkness beneath the heavy foliage, he dropped from the saddle. Picking his way carefully, he quartered off to his right through the trees to get around in front of the cabin. He was a little beyond the door when he pushed away part of a bush to peer into the clearing.

A figure was framed in the doorway, standing slaunchwise in the gunman's half crouch. His levelled weapon gleamed in the moonlight. Barney Cross couldn't quite make out his features as the man himself was just inside, staring up the path toward where the horse stood out of sight in the blackness. There were several seconds, achingly long like a held, indrawn breath.

Then: "Who's out there? Talk up or I'll cut loose with this hoglog! I can see you, gopher!" It was the man in the doorway, voice hard with bluster but with a hint of shakiness. And Barney knew that quick nasal voice, the voice of his brother-in-law, Ollie Slemp.

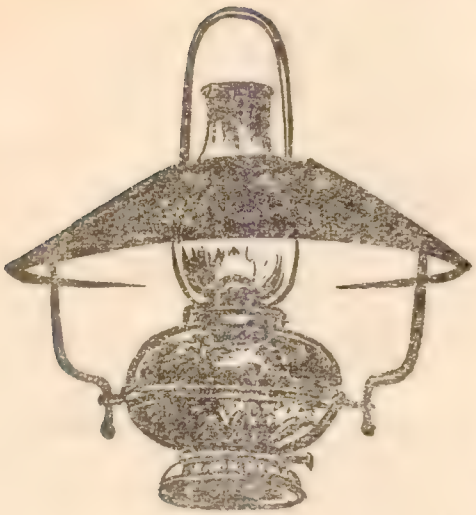
He waited, not sure what he was going to do. For Ollie was a wanted man, wanted for murder.

After Ollie had left Wagon Forks, word had drifted back a few months later. Once it was that he had been jailed for a short spell in Ajo for some minor charge. Then, later, it had been that he was wounded in some honky tonk gunfight. About a year after that, the word was that Ollie was riding with Renegade Langan's bunch, an owlhoot outfit. Then there had been that attempted bank hold-up down in Headstone. Ollie had been one of the three captured, surrendering without firing a shot when the local Vigilantes had jumped them.

That had been Ollie all over, Barney Cross had realized when he got the news. Weak inside, actually, and easily led, but cracking in a tight. He'd gotten a three-year term in the Big House. Then, a few weeks back, had come the letter saying he was going to be released, that he was coming home to go straight. Ellen had been terribly upset.

"He'll never be any good, Barney," she'd cried out, crumpling the letter in her hand. "He's weak inside. You know it. I don't want him here. I know it sounds cruel, but he makes trouble wherever he is..."

Barney had reminded her Ollie was her brother. But she grew more nervous with each passing day. And two days ago, she had been proven right about her brother and his hollow promise of going straight. Over at Elk Bench, aged and slightly feeble-minded Del Knox had been fatally beaten by gunbarrel blows in the commission of an attempted robbery. He had just inherited a considerable sum of dinero from a brother back East. And it was well known in the settlement that old Del didn't trust banks, that he had the money cached around his place somewhere.



Though they'd torn the place apart, even ripping up the floor, the thieves had failed to find his cache. And in the dawn, they'd been seen going away from the old man's cabin by two witnesses who recognized them. One, they told, was the lately released Ollie Slemp. The other was Charlie Langan, the Renegade's young brother. Two posses had taken the trail.

Now...

OVERHEAD the tree tops whispered softly in the night. From higher up on the ridge came the cry of a coyote. Barney Cross had his own Frontier model Colts out now. Hunted as he was, Ollie Slemp would be a dangerous critter, liable to throw down on anybody. Then it was sort of decided for Cross. For the keyed-up, half-scared Ollie moved out of the doorway, then slid along the front side of the cabin, plastered to the wall. Barney could see the big fugitive's face now with the long eyes that slanted downward, the too-thin nose, the too-small mouth that always seemed half pursed, the whole sly look of him.

He got in the shadow at the end of the cabin, then bawled out again. "Come outa there, you skulking polecat! I can see you! I'll—"

Barney walked cat-footedly out into the clearing, his gun muzzle covering Ollie's back. "All right, Ollie. Turn around. But don't try to bust a cap on me—you're covered! And my gun hammer's eared back."

As Ollie Slemp came around slowly, the pony tethered in the saplings on the other side of the cabin nickered. The big ex-convict saw his small brother-in-law and his eyes bugged. "Barney," he got out as if his throat was full of glue, the name sticking. And Ollie's gun went down swiftly. As Barney knew, Ollie Slemp had been afeared of him for years...

IN THE flashy pearl-gray suit, now powdered with trail dust, rumpled, and with a brush tear in one pant leg, Ollie Slemp stood, wavering a little. Then he dredged up a grin. "Barney! By grab, this is great—the one person after Sis I'd want to see!" He came forward, hand outstretched. "Especially now, when I'm in a tight," he added, face going grave.

Barney shook with him. After all, the man was his wife's brother. They went inside the cabin, Barney following the fugitive, both men sheathing their weapons. Barney wasn't worried about Ollie making any kind of a play. When their eyes had met a moment ago out front, deep in Ollie Slemp's had come that sort of evasive, half-fawning look. Ollie was still afraid of him; he always had been since that larruping in the schoolyard little Barney had given him when they were both boys and oversized Ollie was the school bully.

Now, Ollie relighted the candle on the tin pie plate on the cabin table, quickly shoving the door closed. He had already hung a blanket over the little place's one window. Then he turned around and started talking fast before Barney could ask any questions.

"They're after me—after me hard, Barney!" He told how he'd tried to get through to the south for the Line and been cut off by a third posse that had been organized when the alarm went out over the telegraph wires. He'd been forced to double back, been shot at by the second posse from the settlement. "I

know, I know, Barney—looks like I'm carrying my trouble to your home, a-being on your land like this."

But he had cut up into the hills, Ollie told it. And then his pony, already all boogered down, had crashed crossing a rocky-bottomed creek, lamed a foreleg badly. "I had to walk him the last coupla miles gitting here, Barney—I—" He broke off at that implacable look in Barney Cross' eyes.

The latter said slowly, "Ollie, you killed a man; you're charged with murder. I ought to take you in and hand you over to the sheriff."

Ollie grabbed the edge of the table with both hands, the knuckles going white. He'd sat down in one of the chairs. "I didn't kill old Del Knox, Barney. I swear it!" He forced his eyes wide and they had those same tawny lights that the eyes of Ellen, Barney's wife, had. "Charlie Langan, he was the one. Not me, Barney. I wasn't even there."

"What?"

"Honest, Barney. I said I was going straight, didn't I?"

"Why were you riding with Charlie Langan then?"

Ollie shrugged. "Well, we both came outa prison together, at the same time. He was coming up this way. So..." He told how they'd come into Elk Bench because Charlie had an old friend there, a barkeep. Charlie had left him around midnight. Hours later, when he hadn't returned, Ollie had gone hunting him, found him coming out of Knox' cabin in the pre-dawn light. Charlie told him there'd been some trouble, that he had accidentally killed the old man. They'd busted the breeze out of there. Ollie finished with: "That's how it was, Barney. I'd swear it on a Bible!"

BARNEY scraped at a broken fingernail, forehead corrugated. "If you're innocent, Ollie, then come in with me to Wagon Forks and turn yourself over to the Law! A man who's not guilty doesn't have to run like a dirty coyote, Ollie. Give yourself up, man!"

"My Gawd, Barney, who'd believe me? I'm a jailbird. I got no proof I didn't do it. Why a lynch mob'd grab me and make a cottonwood apple outa me so dang fast I—"

"Wait, Ollie," Barney said, thinking hard, wanting to give his wife's brother every chance if his story *was* true. "Now—"

"No, Barney! I wish I could. It's tough when a man tries to go straight an'—an' aims to build a new life and then—" His voice broke and he covered his eyes a moment. "Barney, let me take your horse! I'll send the animal back later—But give me a chance. If I can make it to those Badlands on the other side of this ridge, then hit across 'em...well, on the other side are some friends of the Renegade's, Langan's. They'll hide me out till things quiet down. Then...Barney, let me take your horse! I could never make it on my lame one. Fer the lovva Gawd, man! Fer the love you bear my sister!"

Barney almost weakened then. He drew hard on his quirly, staring at the red-hot tip. "Ollie, mebbe you could clear yourself if you gave yourself up. Or at least, be cleared—if your story is true. Old Man Knox would sure know if Charlie Langan was alone—would know if you weren't with Charlie."

"But Knox is dead!" Ollie burst. "At least, that's what Charlie said..."

"Mebbe-so Charlie made a mistake, didn't realize old Knox could be just unconscious, knocked out." It was a windy he was telling, but if Ollie was innocent, he wouldn't have to fear it at all. "If you gave yourself up, he could clear you, I reckon. If you're innocent like you say, Ollie, you got nothing to fear. It's up to you..."

There was a sweat film on the big fugitive's face. Then he smiled and shoved his hand across the table. "Shake, Barney! I'll go in come morning..."

IT WAS way past midnight. But still Barney Cross sat at the ta-

Two men had beaten old Del Knox.

ble of the line cabin, smoking down quirly after quirly. They'd eaten, Ollie cooking up grub from Barney's saddle roll as the latter unsaddled and picketed the paint out in the lush grass down from the north end of the cabin. Talk had dropped off. Finally Ollie stretched, yawning.

"Reckon I'll turn in. How about you, Barney?" he hinted.

Barney nodded. "Uh-huh. Right soon." He lifted his head. "Something's a-bothering that paint of mine out there. He just nickered. Better take a look-see." He rose and went outside. Some minutes later, he re-entered, shrugging. "Nothing. Reckon he was just a-thinking of that filly back in the home corral." He sat on the other bunk and pulled off his boots. Even before he blew out the candle, Ollie's snoring came from the other bunk.

More than an hour passed, Barney lying on his back, waiting, praying for Ellen's sake that he would be wrong. After that, time seemed to creep over the night like sorghum flowing in wintertime. Then the other bunk creaked; Barney made his breathing slow and heavy as if he were buried in slumber. He was aware of Ollie standing close by his bunk in the darkness. Barney had his hand wrapped around his Colts butt beneath the blanket. Then Ollie moved toward the door, carrying his boots, went out. Barney knew then, beyond any doubt. He sat up in the bunk. A few minutes later, he heard Ollie ride away, driving hard down the cowpath. The horse he forked was no lamed animal. Barney knew it was his own. He calmly fired up a tube of Durham...

IT WAS about two hours later that Sam Tucker, his cowhand, sloped in in the grayish pre-dawn haze. He'd decided to catch his shuteye down near the Notch, then ride in early today. "Ran into the camp of the sheriff's posse a few miles back, Barney. They're out fer your brother-in-law, Ollie. Figger he's heading for your place."

Barney reached for the reins of Sam's pony. "Going to borry your horse for a spell, Sam. Ollie was here; he borryed mine. Take his lame roan there and get back to the posse camp. Tell 'em to cross the ridge and hit the wagon trail out

across the Badlands, Sam." He swung up onto the dun horse, unhurriedly turned it toward the cowpath.

"Better throw the spur steel to that critter if you aim to overtake him yourself, Barney," Sam called.

Barney Cross looked back with a strange wise smile. "There's no hurry, none at all..."

IT WAS broad daylight, with the feeble cloud-shrouded sun already up an hour when he dropped down from the Notch to the rim of the Badlands. It was a strip of desolate sere country to the west of the Big Wagon range, the tail-end of creation. It stretched for miles ahead in a series of low swells, brown, drab, with occasional patches of buffalo grass, once in a while a stunted tree, in the distance a piece of grayish mesquite jungle. For miles there wouldn't be enough shade to cover a gila monster. It was the kind of country a buzzard could starve to death in, as bad as a desert in its way.

On the wagon trail, Barney picked out the fresh tracks of his own paint pony easily. A little further on, by a fallen-in soddy, he peered closer at the hoofprints. What he saw made him smile grimly. It came about an hour later, what he knew would happen. The track had angled around a piece of ourcropping lava formation like a small bluff, then dipped into a small unexpected hollow. And down there, staggering along in his high-heeled boots, leading the paint horse which limped badly on a foreleg, was Ollie Slemp.

He heard Barney's approaching when the cayuse's hoof struck a half buried stone. Ollie whipped around beside the paint, whipping up a gun with blinding speed, triggering desperately. Barney got his hogleg out and fired once, nicking Ollie's sombrero brim. At the same moment, the paint horse shied away from him and trotted off the wagon track. Ollie flung himself over the other way to get behind a clump of brush. Barney Cross threw the spur steel to the cayuse and went bolting down right at the clump. He fired twice.

There was a howled curse from Ollie. Then he came out, rising up straight, right arm up, gun shed. There was a shallow bullet slice in the flesh of his upper left arm, Barney saw when he dropped to the ground. It was nothing. But it had made Ollie Slemp's nerve run out, he began to whine. "Barney, honest, I was afraid to go into the law and—"

"Shut down, you liar! You were afeared to go in because you knew old Del Knox would identify you as one of his assailants if he still lived. That was the trap I set for you, Ollie, to find out if you just might be innocent. You and Charlie Langan did kill old Knox last night... Now you will go in to see the Law, Ollie—be taken in—by me!"

The big lobo's whole body seemed to deflate, the shoulders sagging. His sly-eyed face seemed to break up, the lower lip trembling. He began to curse vilely in a thin broken voice. "Damn that paint fer a-going lame! Damn his lowdown hide," he went on. "If he hadn't lamed up I'd uh made it 'cross the Badlands an—"

"Don't blame the animal, Ollie. It was me. I fixed it so he'd go lame when I said I heard him nicker last night and went out to see what the trouble was." He dropped to a knee by the right foreleg of the well-trained paint, taking a small clasp knife from a pocket. Then he fingered around the fetlock, pushing up the hairs till he found it.

It was a thick strand of horsehair tied tightly around the leg so as to cut off circulation beneath it. "From the animal's own tail, Ollie," Barney Cross said as he severed it and held it up. "That's what made him go lame...Ten minutes or so, he'll be all right again. Then, we go back, Ollie."

THE END

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in the December issue of

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   Stumble Ames didn't dress well, but he could fight.
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    King MacMasters had hung up his guns, at any cost.

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REAL WESTERN STORIES

FREIGHTERS of the WESTERN PLAINS

True Fact Article

by Harold Gluck

ABOUT A quarter of a century ago, I interviewed a man who had watched the West grow up. He had met all the men who have long since become legends, from Wild Bill Hikock to Bill Cody. My westerner was no law enforcement agent; he was no rancher; no gun slinger—in fact he hated firearms. What was he? In modern language you would call him an itinerant merchant. In those days, with a pack on his back, he sold the little notions that were so essential to every man and woman. "Old Man" Franklin had lived more than his alloted score of years. When I finished the interview he said to me, "There's a question you forgot to ask?" I was puzzled and that was evident from the expression on my face. He laughed and then said, "Never once did you ask how I got my supply of goods replenished?"

The old man was right. I had assumed that goods were just on the spot. A large amount of freight had to be hauled in the days before the Iron Horse linked up both ends of this continent. And that lead to be a great impetus in the territory befreighting. Goods were transported in wagons. The Mormon War of 1857 gave this freighting business a great impetus in the territory between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. It reached its peak in 1866 and then petered out, with freighting serving merely as a link between the railroad or boat and given destination.

The organization of a full-fleged train for crossing the plains consisted of from twenty-five to twenty-six large wagons. Each was capable of carrying a load of from three to three and a half tons. The contents of each wagon was protected by three sheets of thin ducking, the kind of material used at that time for army tents. The number of cattle necessary to draw each wagon was twelve, making six yokes or pairs. And a prudent freighter would always have from twenty to thirty heads of extra oxen, in case of accident to or lameness of some of the animals.

In camping or stopping to allow the cattle to graze, a corral or pen of oblong shape was formed by the

wagons. The tongues were turned out and a log chain extended from the hind wheel of each wagon to the fore wheel of the next behind except for a wide gap at each end. Through these gaps the cattle were driven when they were to be yoked. The entire train of cattle, including the extras, generally numbered from 320 to 330 head and usually from four to five mules for riding and herding. The force of men for each train consisted of a wagonmaster; his assistant; the teamsters; a man to look after the extra cattle, and two or three extra men as a reserve. The average distance traveled with loaded wagons was from twelve to fifteen miles per day. Top speed on good roads was twenty miles. On a return trip with empty wagons, it was easy to make twenty miles per day.

Oxen proved to be the cheapest and the most reliable teams for long trips where they had to live upon the grass. They did good daily work, gathered their own living, and if properly driven, would travel 2,000 miles in a season, or during the months from April to November. The men were formed into what they called "messes." In each mess there was from six to eight men. Each mess selected the man best fitted to serve as cook, and the others carried the water, fuel, and stood guard. Never for a moment at night were the cattle without guard. A two hour turn was taken by each man and this matter was arranged by the men and the wagonmaster. The duty of the wagonmaster was about the same as that of the captain of a ship. His commands had to be obeyed, for in the early stages of travel upon the plains, the men were at all times liable to be attacked by the Indians. The assistant wagonmaster's duty was to carry out the wagonmaster's instructions and he would often be at one end of the train and his superior at the other end while it was moving. It was arranged, when possible, that no two trains should ever camp together, as there was not grass and water sufficient for the animals of both.

THE AVERAGE salary paid the men was $1.00 a day and expenses. Most of the traveling in the early days of freighting was done upon what was called the Santa Fe road, starting from Independence, Mo., and unloading at Santa Fe, N.M. The rattlesnakes on that road, in the beginning, were a great annoyance, often biting the mules and oxen when they were grazing. At first, mules were used altogether for traveling. However they would either die or become useless from the bite of a rattlesnake. The men would sometimes be sent ahead of the caravan with whips to frighten the snakes out of the pathway. Later on, the ox-teamsters, with their lafge whips, destroyed the snakes so fast, that they ceased to be much of a trouble.

Alexander Major, of Pony Express fame made his start in the freighting business. In 1851 he made a very successful crossing of the plains with a full outfit of twenty-five wagons and teams. There was no loss of animals, but owing to the cholera which struck the men, two died. In 1852 Major corraled his wagons and sold the oxen to California emigrants. The next year he bought a new supply of work cattle and again loaded his wagons at Kansas City for Santa Fe, N.M. In 1854 he began to carry freight for the United States Government. His business was growing and he now had 100 wagons in operation. Things were prosperous and neither the Indians nor illness hit his men. But he did begin to lose some of his cattle, due to the Texas fever. In 1855, Alexander Major formed a partnership with W. H. Russell of Lexington, Mos. That year they carried all the government freight that had to be sent from Fort Leavenworth to the different posts or forts. However cholera struck and in June of that year a train of wagons was almost empty because of sick men. Then another train was entirely deserted. The sick men were taken to some of the farmers in the neighborhood. The well men, scared, immediately set out for home. As for the cattle, they just started wandering to the four points of the compass. However cholera

soon disappeared; the cattle were rounded up; and the freighting business resumed. In 1856 the partnership had about three hundred and fifty wagons and teams to work. The profits for 1855 and 1856 amounted to about three hundred thousand dollars. This was big business according to the standards of the day. It even struck the attention of Horace Greely who visited Nebraska City in 1859 and wrote, *Russel, Majors & Waddell's transportation establishment, between the fort and the city is the great feature of Leavenworth. Such acres of wagons! Such pyramids of extra axeltrees! Such herds of oxen! Such regiments of drivers and other employees! No one who does not see can realize how vast a business this is, now how immense are its outlays as well as its income. I presume this great firm has at this hour two millions of dollars invested in stock—mainly oxen, mules and wagons."*

IN 1857 THE Government extended the contract to Majors & Russell for one year longer, and it was during this year the United States Government determined to send an army to Utah to curtail the power of Brigham Young. It meant a great expansion in the company's equipment. Before all the freight could reach Fort Leavenworth, cold weather set in. Grass and water were scarce and many of the animals suffered. Alexander Major took one look at his Profit and Loss statement and almost suffered a heart attack; he had lost the previous two years' profit!

Then the "unofficial war" broke out. A party of Mormons, under the command of Col. Lott Smith had been sent out by the Mormon authorities in the rear of Johnston's army to cut off his supplies. They captured and burned three of the wagon trains, two on the Sandy, just east of Green River. And one on the west bank of Green River. However, the Mormon force had a heart! They gave the captain of each train the privilege of taking one of his best wagons and loading it with supplies to return back to the starting point. Then they burned all supplies. The cattle were driven off by the Mormons. Those not used for beef by the hungry men were returned in the summer to the company after peace had been made between the Mormons and the Government.

In the spring of 1858, the firm's name was changed to Russell, Majors & Waddell and they obtained a new government contract to carry freight to Utah for the years 1858-59. It was necessary to increase the transportation from the three hundred and fifty wagons they had previously owned to 3,500 wagons and teams. It required more than 40,000 oxen to draw the supplies and the records show they employed over 4,000 men and about 1,000 mules.

The greatest drawback that year was due to floods and heavy rains upon the plains. They had to travel a distance of 1,250 miles to Camp Floyd. After unloading the wagons, they were merely stacked up, one next to the other, on a vast expanse of ground. Then they were sold to the Mormo authorities for $10 each, having cost to manufacture from $150 to $175 each. The Mormons simply wrecked most of the wagons just to get the iron they contained in order to manufacture that vital commodity —nails. Major selected 3,500 head of cattle and drove them to Ruby Valley in Nevada. His plan was to let them graze, then drive them to California and sell them as beef cattle. But Old Man winter interfered with this bit of clever planning and only 200 survived a terrible snowstorm. That hit the company for a loss of about $150,000. Then the Indians went on the war path. They attacked the herders in charge of a thousand head of cattle on the Platte River. The cattle were scattered to the four winds and one of the herders was killed.

As the iron rails crossed more and more territory, the death knell of Overland freighting was sounded. How could one compare 15 miles per day as a speed compared to 30 or 40 miles per hour? Yet these wagons had done their part in helping to build up the great West and supply it with needed goods.

THE END

HELL'S POSTMASTER

by Cliff Campbell

Was old Hank crazy in defying Jim Mayo — or just crazy like a fox? In either event, he seemed to be dead for his trouble.

THE GRIM angel of death hovered over Gopher town's scatteration of clapboard shacks and the tensioned onlookers could hear the flap of its wings. All knew that Hank Parsons, the bandy-legged prospector, was about to die. Even owlhoot gunnies didn't talk to Jake Mayo the way old Hank was doing now, for no man went that far and lived.

"Yo're a rash-festered, yaller-livered son o' sin, Mayo!" Old Hank fairly oozed venom as he stood up in his buckboard. His gray beard bristled; his pale eyes shot sparks. "I say yo're the biggest crook that ever hit Gopher an' I'm tellin' it scary! There's plenty this town don't know about yuh, an' I'm gonna...."

The laconic bark of Jake's bucking cutter sent the echoes rocking back and forth. It had leaped into his hand like magic and might have been there all the while as far as anyone knew. Life fled from old Hank's body like grain from a slitted sack. He toppled into the bed of his buckboard in a grotesque heap, his gun half drawn.

An ugly grin of satisfaction split Jake Mayo's swart, cruel face as the crash of his shot brought more citizens pouring from their places of business along the dusty street.

He chocked his still-smoking Bisley back into its worn holster, snapped his battered range hat down over his beetle-brows and turned to the crowd behind him.

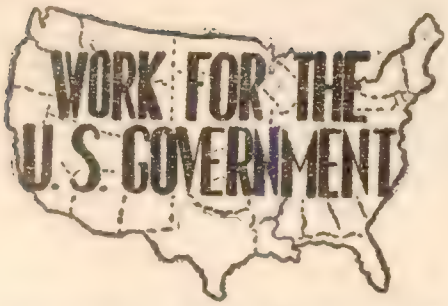
"You-all saw him try tuh jump me," he ground out. "The jigger musta been crazy tuh go tellin' off a gent thataway. 'Course he was lyin', the sin-pimpled rock-buster!"

Jake did not listen for confirmation of his words. People didn't answer for Jake Mayo in Gopher town, he answered for himself.

Chet Connor edged to the warped buckboard with squinting blue eyes fixed sternly on old Hank's whang-leather face. Kinky red hair ran fire beneath the glaring sun, but funsters never called him "Red" more than once. "Hank," he muttered puzzledly. "You must o' been crazy, else you had a right good reason! An' I'm layin' odds, you had!"

The red-head's drawl was meant for hearing ears. It smacked of accumulated anger which had been smoldering for month upon month, and now old Hank's death had fanned it to a flame.

There was a strange glint in Jake's slitted eyes. "Yo're takin' a heap for granted, ain't yuh Postmaster," he



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grated. "I calculate I was dead to rights in layin' him down." He paused with sullen deadliness. "Got any objections?"

Chet's flaring shoulders stiffened and there was burning glow surging thru his veins, that left limp arms lingering above tied-hard guns. "Plenty, Jake! I shore don't like yore killin' a harmless old jasper like Hank, nor squeezin' out these here squatters which is tryin' to make a livin' in these here parts. Maybe yo're leasin' the Triple X from me. Maybe the law says I can't take a hand so long as you pay yore rent til the five year lease is up. But I ain't forgettin' last summer when you fenced the water hole. Let them squatters' cows turn belly up like flies."

A MURMUR of approval rose from scattered throats. The squatters hadn't forgotten how Jake and his gunmen had dammed Rust River two miles below the fabled subterranean cavern that mothered the river in the bowels of the earth.

Both men stood their ground, neither moved as the surrounding men fell back to give them room, expecting momentarily the crash of irons. A darting glance towards his gunmen steeled Jake's courage. Craftily, gnarled hands slipped towards thighs to gain that split second.

Brown eyes wide, Laura Lynn pushed in between the two men, and Chet grinned down at her tilted nose and rounded chin. There was a glow of mutual understanding which passed between them in that tensioned street. Something that stalemated Chet's desire to go streaking for his gun and wash Gopher's lawlessness clean in living blood.

"Chet," she cautioned, "remember you're on duty."

A grin split wide Jake Mayo's bearded face. "I aim this can wait till no ladies is present," he goaded, winking at his gunnies. "I ain't for killin' a man behind a woman's skirt!" A guttural laugh shook his barrel chest, booming loudly for all to hear. "Or maybe, she's savin' me for a weddin' later on when you're dead, Connor. Yuh can't tell what no woman's got back in her mind."

Seven kinds of the devil went to work with a vengeance in Chet's red head. His fist blocked out like a sledge; hammered Jake's narrow chin at the point, snapping it upwards and tumbling the gunman on his neck. Jake's hired killers didn't move, a surprised sag drooping their liquored mouths. They stared suddenly into the bore of Chet's cutter cradled in his hand.

Chet towered above the fallen man. Honest punchers in Gopher town that day marveled at the Postmaster's grit, but not one among them could say he was other than a fool. "Listen Jake," he rasped. "I'm not killin' a man on duty. But that ain't sayin' I can't skin a skunk! A stinkin' polecat which gasses too much for his health! Now if there's any gent here which is objectin', just speak up. I got a right good

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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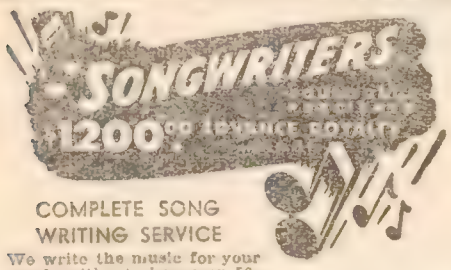

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argument waitin' in this here cutter, an' it's a powerful sure argument."

Casually, Chet backed thru the milling men, eyes never for the moment leaving Jake's startled gunnies. With a toss of her auburn curls, Laura plunged swiftly in his wake, and lithe slim legs and trim youthful body carried her to Chet's arm.

"Chet," she murmured anxiously. "He'll be gunning for you now! Whether he leases the Triple X from you or not!"

The other's tone was vibrant steel, ringing deep down in his corded throat. "Killin' that skunk would be one way o' breakin' his lease. I shore made two mistakes. One, leasin' him the spread; the other, for not killin' him when I got the chance." And at that moment Chet's hair seemed to turn a deeper red.

Chet was talking to Laura when Jake shuffled in, his features twisted in a swollen leer. The gunman resented Chet's attentions to banker Lynn's daughter whom he planned on marrying himself when the right time came, and that time now was near at hand.

He swung to the counter, burnished his gnarled hand against the stained oak. "I got a shipment of gold dust in the mails," he grated.

"I calculate I'll be takin' it out."

Chet noted that Jake's gunnies had filed in and lined the wall, their smirking eyes gathering in the scene. "You can have it Jake," he said. "I ain't one to be tamperin' with the mails, an' I'll be right glad to be gettin' it off my hands."

Something warned Chet against the other's sinister intentions. He couldn't quite fathom its scope, but the feeling was dominant nevertheless. The vault door hung ajar as usual during office hours. With swift stride, he stooped into the compartment. Then he swore softly beneath his breath. The shelf he had lain the package on the night before, was bare. Jake's parcel was gone, had vanished as completely as if it had taken wings!

A knot bulged Chet's tauted cheek bones. He wiped steeled fingers thru his red hair. It crackled with static, synonymous to the tension pulsing within his lanky body.

Jake grinned as Chet returned. The boy's face was an expressionless mask, his eyes enigmatic. "Laura," he muttered softly. "I got a right important letter for your Dad. Maybe you'd better be takin' it to him right-pronto. At present, I ain't got time."

He flipped the letter across the table. Reluctantly, she obeyed. A sense of relief coursed thru his veins when she was gone. Anything was apt to happen in the next few moments.

Chet's lips hardly moved as he spoke. "The vault's been robbed. Your shipment's gone."

"Gone?" Jake rasped. "You're holdin' it. Yuh know damn well that money goes for buyin' that shipment o' beef I got comin' in tomorrow mornin'. Chet Connor, I ain't gonna take your lies! Not by a damn site! I'm askin' for that gold, an' gettin' it!"

"You ain't gettin' nothin', Jake. It's been stole."

A CURT command seeped from Jake Mayo's lips. Chet sensed its meaning before the gunman spoke. The eye could not have caught the movement of Chet's stab-

[*Turn Page*]

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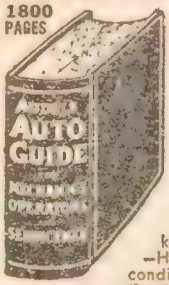

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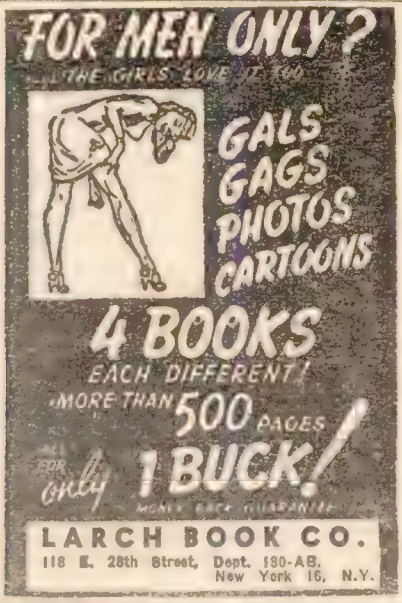

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bing hands, other than a fleeting shadow, nothing more. Then two sixguns palmed before their staring eyes and wide-eyed men watched with stunned fascination, fingers paralyzed midair.

Chet realized fully the seriousness of the situation. Three years had been sufficient for the gunman to dominate the range with his brutal tactics. Before nightfall, Jake would have the entire town crashing down around his ears. And Gopher town had a reputation of taking the law into its own hands.

"You gents ain't fit for corpses," Chet grunted. "But I reckon you're gonna miss yore callin' if you get to strayin' with your hands. I got a itch on a trigger finger which is achin' to be scratched. An' this is a plumb powerful itch."

Jake fumed, he swore between yellow teeth. "You're gonna hang for this, Connor!"

Chet's wedged chin protruded, knuckles arced to cold iron washed white. "Maybe yo're right, Mayo. But you ain't likely to be seein' the fun. Boothill ain't that close, an' I ain't never seen a dead skunk gawkin' thru six feet o' sod."

With a grin he sidled to the door and swung into the street beyond. No time to sling a rig on his bronc tethered at the livery stable. Seconds were the elements between life and death. The buckboard caught his glance. With a stride he gained its seat and quirted the reins. Stung, the pinto snapped into action with dust kicking at its startled heels.

Jake and his men were piling out the door, flame belching from their palmed sixguns. With deadly accuracy, Chet thumbed a barrage and three punchers felt the sting of his bucking gun. Quail-like, the remainder scurried for cover, snapping shots at the rattling horse and wagon.

White heat seared Chet's left shoulder. The slug fairly tore him from the bouncing seat, but fighting grimly he hung on, teeth clenched hard. The wagon barreled yellow dust into the sultry air that reeked with the cries of pursuing men.

For the first time, Chet had a

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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chance to weigh past events. Now, he knew that fighting his way out, had only played into Jake Mayo's hands. The bony pinto couldn't match range-hard buckskins, all picked horses from Jake Mayo's herd. Eventually the crowbait would founder in his own tracks, and then, Jake and his gunnies would be there for the kill.

Rust River cavern! The thought sprang alive in his mind. It wasn't far, if the pinto could hold out. Once in its honey-combed depths snaking into the bowels of the earth, he defied Jake and his men to hunt him out. He wasn't running away, not by a damn site. He was coming back, and when he did, Gopher town would be hearing a different tune.

"Son, shore as hell yo're jarrin' the livin' daylights outa a old man."

Chet started to the sound, whipped around in the seat. Old Hank Parsons, propped on a skinny elbow was squinting at the boy.

"Gawd Hank!" Chet rasped hoarsely. "I thought you was dead!"

The prospector grinned weakly, arced a wad into the air. "Shucks," he grunted disgustedy. "That yellow bellied son-o'-sin ain't never killed a Parsons yit! The coyote jus' creased me." He swore acidly, feeling the blood clot splotching his wrinkled old head. Finally, he peered interestedly over the horizon. "Say son," he suddenly questioned. "Where yuh headed?"

As Chet told him, Hank's guffaw burst down upon his ears. "You ravin' jackass," the boy bellowed. "That there slug musta hamstrung yore mind."

The old man crawled to the seat. "Son," he said, "yo're headed right where Jake Mayo don't hanker yuh goin'. Yuh never knowed it 'fore, but there's gold in that there hole-a-hell. Gold! Gold! Yuh hear that? An' Jake's been workin' the danged mine for months."

Chet arched a brow not believing his ears, nor hardly the old man. A sickening feeling tore at the pit of his stomach and his shoulder gushed blood that saturated his shirt to the belt. "Listen Hank," he bit out

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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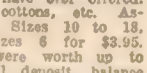

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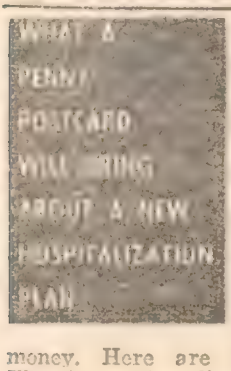

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weakly. "Maybe I'm hearin' things? Maybe I ain't hearin' well?"

Hank told him again. That he had run on the mine accidentally and had been discovered by one of Jake's men. Then he had escaped down the cavern, reached his buckboard with killers hot on his trail, bent on sealing his lips before he reached town. But they hadn't succeeded for old Hank could get miles out of his pinto when he was at the reins.

Straight for the saloon, he had headed with all intentions of getting a good stiff drink. He had downed one too many when he ran into Jake and lost his head. "I reckon that's the story," Hank finished with a vigorous nod. "An' danged if I ain't surprised I ain't dead."

Gold in Rust River cavern! The truth smacked home to Chet. Plainly, Jake wanted him out of the way, and the gunman had cut Hank down right before the Post Office to seal Hank's lips, knowing the gunplay would draw Chet onto the street. With the building deserted, one of Jake's men had slipped into the vault, stolen the package while the street teemed with men. It was a perfect frame and no doubt the money was at that very moment planted in his room as incriminating evidence for Gopher's hireling sheriff.

The horizon seemed to be whirling before his eyes. The galloping buckskin blurred into a mist. Grimly, he fought against the wound's nauseating dizziness but to no avail. Then suddenly a black shadow swept him into oblivion. . . .

MUSTY oppressive air bore down on Chet's feverish body as he opened his eyes. A yellow light flickered at his back, he moved and pain stabbed thru his shoulder while rawhide cut at his bound wrists.

He lay on the damp floor of the cavern. His wound had been dressed, for the crude bandage pulled of clotted blood where his shirt had been hastily torn away. For minutes he lay still, puzzling over his surroundings, grasping elusive threads

of transpired events.

Face twisted to the pain, he jackknifed his legs, rolled to face the light. A groan escaped his tauted lips, he cursed his weakness from loss of blood. A boot heel caught Chet full in the stomach; he looked up into Jake's gloating yellow grin. "Maybe yuh ain't comfortable, Connor. I reckon we might haze one of the boys out to get a bed, only yuh ain't gonna be needin' it by then. You're takin' one a these here holes plumb down to hell. You're gonna die like a rat in a hole, Connor."

Propped against the wall, Hank threshed in wild rage that pinched his wrinkled face. "Yuh swayback lizards," he boomed. "Lift them hobbles offa me, an' I'll bash yore cowardly skulls!"

Chet's cool glance swept Jake and the five gunmen encircling the deadwood fire. Jake's intentions were starkly plain. Two corpses lodged deep in any one of the thousand caverns, might shrink to whitened bones for untold centuries before being discovered. "The river from hell," he told himself. "The devil's playground, an' Hank an' me is headed plumb for the horned gent's merry-go-round."

Rough hands jerked Hank and Chet to their feet, and silently they were goaded into a side passage studded with stalagmites which glistened to the lantern's rays. Jake trailed a ribbon of small twine in their wake to insure a safe return. Chet's eyes glinted strangely as he noted the other playing out the cord.

"Araid you'll get lost, Jake?"

The gunman wiped a dirty sleeve across the lantern's smoky glass. "Don't yuh worry none. I'm the gent which is goin' back to get rich on your little mine, an' marry that little spit-fire, Laura Lynn."

Chet Connor's lips moved to retort, then froze into silence as his legs doubled in, and limp he crashed to the rocky floor. Jake's muttered oath cut the stillness. He bent over, cast the light beam square into Chet's face. Then suddenly the man on the floor came to life. Thonged hands slashed at the swinging lantern, it tore from Jake's hand,

[*Turn Page*]

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crashed tingling against rock, and flame snuffed out absorbed by the blackness of hell.

Blue flame winked. Hot lead fanned Chet's cheek, splattered against stone at his back. Swearing softly, he hacked razor-edged rock against his thongs, and with a cry of joy he felt them snap. Swiftly he clawed out at the blackness until his hands contacted flesh, coursed upwards to a bulging throat that felt vise-like fingers with the strength of a superhuman man of iron.

Securing he dying man's gun, he threw the tremoring gunman's body from him. Powder barked ominously feet ahead, its chatter followed by a pandemonium that broke from the roots of hell and echoed eerily thru the bowels of the earth.

Chet targeted the flames that blinked death before his eyes, praying that old Hank was beyond the range of fire. Livid fire coughed, rattled; acrid smoke stifled Chet's nostrils as lead ricocheted screamingly rock against rock. Crouching, running, swearing softly to his bucking gun, Gopher's Postmaster laid down a barrage of death. Crimson flecked Jake Mayo's lips, hawked features twitching to the gnawing pain tearing at his hairy chest. Clawing, twitching convulsively, the gunman's bloodshot eyes turned an enigmatic glass. A hollow rattle seeped

from his corded throat, then he was dead. And that day Rust River's fabled cavern saw its rocky floors drip red with forfeited human blood, clensing the range of a mongrel scourge....

OLD HANK PARSONS found and lit the lantern. A lone gunman rocked before him, feet wide apart. Hank's wizened old eyes swept the circle of light. The cavern's floor was strewn with wounded and dying men. He scratched his head, and spat digustedly. "Danged if yuh didn't do a right good job." he grunted. "It was so damn dark, I plumb missed seein' the fun."

Shoulders hunched to the pain racking his feverish wound, Chet nodded towards the gunmen on the floor. "Hank," he murmured. "One of them gents on the floor there oughta have enough strength to be writin' a confession for the rest." He grinned into Hank's whang-leather face as he went on. "Hank, yore prospectin' days is over. From now on we're workin' that mine on a 50-50 split."

The old man grinned and ten years seemed to have lifted from his weathered hide. "Son," he said, "yo're gonna be the richest Postmaster in these here parts."

"Nope Hank," Chet murmured softly, his lean jaw haggard, worn, as he shook his head. "I'm goin' back where I belong. I ain't cut out to be ridin' herd on the mails, 'cause cows is my line an' the Triple X is a damn good spread. From now on them squatters is gonna get a chance to live."

Old Hank cocked a knowing eye. "I reckon Laura Lynn is gonna miss yuh when yuh ride trail from town, Chet. Maybe yuh was calculatin' on takin' her along?"

Chet Connor grinned and he scratched his chin. And old Hank Parsons knew he had smacked the nail plumb on the head.

THE END

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HAIR LOSS

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There are six principal types of hair loss, or *alopecia,* as it is known in medical terms:

1. Alopecia from diseases of the scalp
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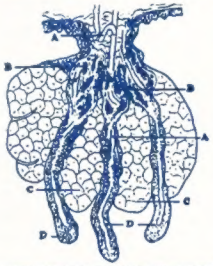
3. Alopecia of the aged (senile baldness)
4. Alopecia areata (loss of hair in patches)
5. Alopecia of the young (premature baldness)
6. Alopecia at birth (congenital baldness)

Senile, premature and congenital alopecia cannot be helped by anything now known to modern science. Alopecia from improper functioning of the body requires the advice and treatment of your family physician.

BUT MANY MEDICAL AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE A SPECIFIC SCALP DISEASE IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF HAIR LOSS.

DANGER SYMPTOMS! This disease is called Seborrhea and can be broadly classified into two clinical forms with the following symptoms:

1. ***DRY SEBORRHEA:*** The hair is dry, lifeless, and without gloss. A dry flaky dandruff is usually present with accompanying itchiness. Hair loss is considerable and increases with the progress of this disease.
2. ***OILY SEBORRHEA:*** The hair and scalp are oily and greasy. The hair is slightly sticky to the touch and has a tendency to mat together. Dandruff takes the form of head scales. Scalp is usually itchy. Hair loss is severe with baldness as the end result.



DESTRUCTION OF HAIR FOLLICLES
Caused By Seborrhea
A — Dead hairs; B — Hair-destroying bacteria; C — Hypertrophied sebaceous glands; D — Atrophic follicles.

Many doctors agree that to NEGLECT these symptoms of DRY and OILY SEBORRHEA is to INVITE BALDNESS.

Seborrhea is believed to be caused by three germ organisms — staphylococcus albus, pityrósporum ovale, and acnes bacillus.

These germs attack the sebaceous gland causing an abnormal working of this fat gland. The hair follicle, completely surrounded by the enlarged diseased sebaceous gland, then begins to atrophy. The hair produced becomes smaller and smaller until the hair follicle dies. Baldness is the inevitable result. (See illustration.)

But seborrhea can be controlled, particularly in its early stages. The three germ organisms believed to cause seborrhea, can and should be eliminated before they destroy your normal hair growth.

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A Few of the Many Grateful Expressions by Users of Comate Medicinal Formula

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"Your hair formula got rid of my dandruff; my head does not itch any more. I think it is the best of all of the formulas I have used."—E.E., Hamilton, Ohio.

"Your formula is everything you claim it to be and the first 10 days trial freed me of a very bad case of dry seborrhea." —J.E.M., Long Beach, Calif.

"I do want to say that just within five days I have obtained a great improvement in my hair. I do want to thank you and the Comate Laboratories for producing such a wonderful and amazing formula."—M.M., Johnstown, Pa.

"I have found almost instant relief. My itching has stopped with one application."—J.N., Stockton, Calif.

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"This formula is everything if not more than you say it is. I am very happy with what it's doing for my hair." —T.J., Las Cruces, New Mexico

"I find it stops the itch and retards the hair fall. I am thankful for the help it has given me in regard to the terrible itchiness."—R.B.L., Philadelphia, Pa.

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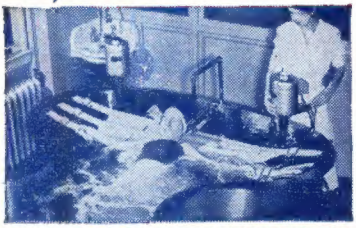

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